Of Two Minds

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by kishafisha

Summary

Will, an organic, works for the Artifice Behavioral Analysis Unit wherein he investigates heinous crimes involving synthetic persons; including homocides or syntheticides, should the victim be an Artifice. His high rate of success stems from being an empath, a rare and invaluable trait that developed in humans as a result of excess technology, granting him the ability to read the emotions of both humans and Artifices. That same talent, coupled with a compromised immune system born of long-term suppressant use, causes Will to contract a brain fever that leaves him with only two options: give up his work in the field or have an Artificial Neural Assistant implanted in his head.

Notes

Where to even begin... This is my submission to the 2018 Murder Husbands Big Bang partnered with incredible art by lasicvaa. You can find their utterly gorgeous art masterpost here! HUGE thanks to the mods and my artist for being so supportive and understanding of how my life fell apart right at the end. There was a moment where I honestly wasn't sure that I would be able to bring myself to finish.

I binged Hannibal in December of last year for the very first time after being lured in by the amazing art of reapersun. Almost immediately after, I binged Black Mirror for the very first time and thus this brain child was born. I honestly never imagined that I would bring it to fruition, but then I saw a listing for MHBB and thought...why not? This is my love letter to Hannibal and my favorite bits of sci-fi, including Blade Runner, Ghost in the Shell, The Matrix, Ex Machina, T2: Judgment Day, Upgraded, Black Mirror and DBH. Since DBH happened to release right as I was blocking out the story, I absorbed some of the characters into this. It is only *very* loosely a crossover.

All my love to my wife, without whom I would never have been able to finish this, and my beta ravenfyre for catching my erroneous words and constantly encouraging me to keep going. Additional warnings (including *major* spoilers) can be found in the end notes.

See the end of the work for more notes

“This is crazy,” Will Graham muttered to himself as he scrolled through the consent form on his data pad for the fourth time that morning.

“Completely bat shit,” Beverly Katz agreed helpfully at his side, her eyes never leaving her own pad. Rather than a consent form, she was scrolling idly through trash tabloids, seemingly unaffected by Will’s encroaching breakdown.

“Why did I let you talk me into this?” he accused, glaring at her from over the rim of his glasses.

Beverly shot him an unimpressed look, raising an eyebrow coolly. “I *didn’t* talk you into this. I’ve tried talking you *out* of this. Twice,” she said pointedly. “*Jack* talked you into this.”

Sighing, Will pushed his fingers up under his glasses to pinch the bridge of his nose, because she was absolutely right. Jack *had* pushed him into this. “Maybe we should go…”

Finally setting aside her pad, Beverly sat up straight and turned in her seat to give him a hard stare. “Let me stop you there, because we both know that you’re not *really* going to go. You’ll walk just outside and call Jack, who will remind you that you can’t continue to work

in the field unless you do this, and then we'll be right back in here. I, for one, am getting really sick of this goddamn waiting room, so it's time to shit or get off the damn pot."

Will grimaced and then glowered half-heartedly in her direction, not quite meeting her eye. That was precisely why this was so damned hard…because Will didn't want to give up his ability to operate as a field agent for the Artifice Behavioral Analysis Unit. The ABAU was a specialized division within the Federal Security Department presided over criminal cases involving one or more persons who were at least partially artificial, if not wholly so. Typically these were either homicides or syntheticides, should the victim be one of the synthetic organisms classified as *Homo artificialis*, or Artifice, as they were more commonly known. The classification afforded rights and protections to Artifices over non-sentient androids or robots, but it was a controversial subject to both supporters and critics of synthetic life.

Over the course of his life, Will had often been accused of being an Artifice. It was a foolish prejudice born of both stereotypical misconceptions that being synthetic made one inept at social situations and a general lack of understanding toward what it meant to be on the spectrum. Many parents elected to use neuroimplants to suppress and counter the symptoms when they presented in children, as the general populace tended to do with most physical and mental ailments, disorders or disabilities…so long as they could afford it. The tendency toward artificial overcorrection in the modern world only served to emphasize the strangeness of organics like Will.

That same perceived abnormality that made so many humans, both organic and cybernetic, uncomfortable around Will went hand in hand with the unique talent that made him such a successful agent. Will was an empath, a rare and valued trait in a world so heavily reliant upon technology, but more than that, he was able to read Artifices just as clearly as humans. In many ways, Will found it easier than trudging through the mire of primal emotion that humans unknowingly subjected him to. It was thankless, taxing work, but Will was able to make a *difference* with the ABAU and he didn't want to give that up. The virulent infection he'd contracted in his brain six months ago didn't leave him a lot of options on that front.

"There has to be an alternative…" Will murmured to himself, staring at his hands where they gripped white-knuckled around the lip of his data pad.

Beverly's tough demeanor softened somewhat and she laid a hand over Will's, which he allowed only because he knew her so well, used to the care and concern that radiated through him at her touch. "You know that there isn't…Jack would already have a waiver in hand if that were the case. You had seizures, Will. As in *multiple* seizures. They won't risk putting you back in the field without an implant now. Hell, if they knew about the hallucinations and memory gaps, IA would have force retired you," she said pointedly, but not unkindly.

His partner had dutifully kept the full extent of his ailments out of her report when, after a particularly violent seizure at a crime scene, Will had shakenly confessed everything to her. Beverly had been worried about Will for months leading up to the event, concerned that the constant strain on his abilities was starting to break him, but he'd been careful to conceal what was happening to him out of fear he might actually be losing his mind. Will knew that Beverly would rather he *didn't* return to the field, but she hadn't told Internal Affairs what

he'd disclosed to her in confidence and had even reluctantly supported his efforts toward being reinstated as a full agent…which had led them here.

"ANAs have been used successfully for over two decades now," Beverly reminded him, sounding resigned even as she tried to reassure him. "And Lecter Ltd has always been at the forefront of that technology, even if they didn't manage to claim the patent in time."

"Because they were conducting illegal experiments…"

"*Allegedly*," she grinned, raising an eyebrow. "No one has ever been able to prove any misconduct went on. They won the government contract, anyway. So as long as the ABAU is picking up the tab, this is as good as it gets." Leaning in, Beverly ducked her head down until she caught his eye, the bionic implants that made up her irises rotating slightly to focus on him, only strengthening the connection of her emotions in doing so. "I know you're going to go through with it, because you're a *stubborn, masochistic asshole*, but I just want to point out one last time that you don't *have* to."

Unlike Will, Beverly was cybernetic and had been gleefully adding to her growing collection of implants in the five years that he'd worked alongside her. She had started long before she'd ever gone through the Academy, but as an agent she'd been more than happy to take advantage of the discounts afforded federal employees. At this point she was essentially a walking forensics lab, though she'd drunkenly confided to Will that her favorite implant was actually her synthetic right hand, the result of a boating accident.

"The credits I save on charge cells now," she'd told him with a lurid smile, waggling her fingers suggestively. *"Will, darling, you have* ***no*** *idea."*

Will did, unfortunately, have *some* idea and at least enough that the mental image would likely haunt him the rest of his days. Yet despite all the voluntary upgrades Beverly had undergone over the years, even *she* had never gotten an ANA. Artificial Neural Assistants were one of the most expensive and *invasive* procedures that a human could undergo, creating a synergic relationship between a human brain and an artificial one. It was a fairly standard procedure for corporate heads and politicians, who could rely upon an infallible machine that was always at the beck and call of their waking mind, but the original intention of the design had actually been to provide immediate and continuous medical assistance to those at risk.

"Of course I have to," Will sighed out finally and afforded his partner a tired, lopsided grimace of a smile. "But thanks for saying it." He looked down at the consent form on his data pad one last time before he held his breath and pressed his thumb firmly into the sensor to sign it.

There came a soft, pleasant chime to herald his acceptance, though Will rather thought the ominous toll of a church bell would have been more appropriate. The form blinked and then vanished as it transferred out over the Net and the pad cleared back to the river that made up his home screen, streaming serenely away from him. Will watched the flow of water for a few moments, trying and failing to let his thoughts drift away from him just as peacefully before he sighed and put the pad back into his coat pocket. Beverly caught his hand and

squeezed it briefly, doubt and affection pulsing through him at her touch, but she released him again as the door opened and a perfectly coiffed blonde woman walked through it.

“Agent Graham?” she asked politely, a cool smile on her face as she extended her hand. “I’m Doctor Du Maurier, I’ll be assisting you with your procedure today.”

“Great,” he said flatly, ignoring her hand and pushing to his feet, the lack of enthusiasm toward what lay ahead painfully clear.

Dr. Du Maurier’s smile tightened fractionally, but she merely turned to offer her hand to Beverly instead, who stood and shook it gamely. “And you must be his partner. Agent Katz, is that correct?”

“Two for two, doc.”

“Excellent. Jack said that you’d likely be coming along to ensure Agent Graham gets home safely once we’ve finished the procedure.”

That caught Will’s attention and he looked at her finally, though he kept his eyes carefully away from hers. Dr. Du Maurier was older than Will by at least a decade and attractive in a natural way that made it clear she was mostly organic. Still there was something about her that spoke to Will of artifice, and the telltale glow of an LED at her right temple made it clear that she believed in her product enough to have had it installed within her own head. Though LED displays were not required of ANA implants, they were a clear indicator of one. To the rich and powerful, they were a sort of status symbol, especially given that each company involved in the production of ANAs had their own unique icon. A common back alley implant was an approximation of the display units themselves, giving humans the illusion of wealth and Artifices the illusion of being *human*.

Will would not have the option of whether or not to have the LED installed. All medical ANAs, and especially those funded by the government, utilized their external displays to notify passerby if the host was in need of assistance. The ANA could contact emergency services on its own, but studies had shown that the host would have a better chance of survival in the event of a crisis should those in the immediate vicinity be aware of their distress. Will couldn’t tell by looking if Dr. Du Maurier’s ANA was of the medical or personal variety, but it was currently pulsing with a soft, pleasant blue light. The LED display for Lecter Ltd was a coin-sized disc of synthetic skin surrounding an indicator light shaped like a stylized antler, a symbol repeated several times over in the company’s logo. Soon, Will would be similarly branded in their marketing.

“Bella’s leukemia,” he said suddenly as his mind made the connection between why Jack would be on first name terms with this woman…and why he’d been so keen on the idea of Will signing up for this. “You implanted her ANA.”

Cancer was still a leading cause of death in the human populace today, as many of its treatment methods were incompatible with most implants and synthetic organs were cost-restrictive. Jack’s wife had been a stoic organic for all her life and had fully intended to allow nature to take its course after receiving her diagnosis, but her husband had eventually convinced her otherwise. There had been a strain of resentment on their relationship for

months until Bella's health finally began to improve. The Crawfords were a proud, stubborn pair, but Bella couldn't hold lasting resentment after proof that her life could continue as it had before her diagnosis.

Dr. Du Maurier afforded Will a small, pleased smile at the recognition of her efforts in Bella's recovery and nodded. "Bella has been one of our greatest successes in recent years. Our ANA, combined with her synthetic lungs, allowed Bella to make a full recovery from what would surely have been a terminal illness even a decade ago," she said evenly, if a little more boastful than Will would have preferred. "Jack mentioned your skill in making connections…I suppose that's part of what makes you so valuable to the ABAU, Agent Graham."

"Lucky me," he replied dryly and Beverly coughed behind her synthetic hand to hide a smile. "Can we get this over with?"

Something flickered across her face, but Will was well used to people getting put off by his abrasive nature. Fortunately for him, Beverly usually stepped in to smooth things over and she did so now as she said, "I think what Will is trying to say here is that he's grateful for the chance to work with someone who's already done so much to help our team."

The doctor smiled thinly and nodded, but what little warmth she had faded to cool professionalism. "I'm sure you're both eager for Will to get back out in the field. If you have other business to attend to, Agent Katz, this will take several hours. Otherwise you're welcome to make yourself comfortable."

Beverly nodded and folded her arms across her chest, looking to Will with a reassuring smile. "I'll hang around," she said and Will gave her a nod of thanks.

"As you wish. Right this way, Agent Graham," she said and gestured for Will to follow, leading him back the way she'd come in. "I've been reviewing your case and I must confess I find your abilities to be quite…fascinating."

"Most physicians do," Will muttered, letting his eyes wander over the bland walls of the facility, broken only by the doors leading to what he assumed to be either offices or examination rooms.

"Have you ever considered a brain mapping?" Dr. Du Maurier wondered and Will glanced at her, his brow furrowing deeply at the suggestion. "It would be greatly beneficial to the scientific community. A contribution like that might very well change the modern world, for human and Artifice alike."

"Brain mapping is *unethical*," he stressed through his teeth, even as a wave of revulsion rolled through him.

"But not illegal," she countered, which was only technically true. While the use of brain mapping in a controlled research setting wasn't illegal in the North American Republic, the practice was still highly regulated and a major point of contention in political, religious and scientific communities alike, to the point where it was banned in most of the eastern hemisphere. Dr. Du Maurier was hardly the first to ever suggest Will subject himself to a

virtualization of his mind in the interest of studying his empathy, but considering she was about to render him unconscious for an invasive cranial procedure, the mention of it left him on edge.

“I have *no* interest in becoming a lab rat, Doctor Du Maurier,” he told her coldly, glaring at the line of her jaw, which tensed with obvious displeasure.

“Of course, Agent Graham. I would merely be remiss of my profession if I did not ask,” she replied genially, though he was sure he didn’t imagine the frost in her tone. Stopping before one of the exam rooms, she opened the door and gestured him inside. “You’ll find a gown on the shelf just there and your personal effects can go into the bin provided. A Medical Droid will be by momentarily to take your vitals, shave your head and insert your peripheral intravenous line. I’ll be back to conduct a brief, recorded interview before we prep you for surgery to ensure we have a proper baseline on file. And to pair you with a compatible ANA, of course.”

“Baseline?” Will repeated, glancing about the small, sterile room with its single chair and gurney. “Why would you need a baseline?”

“There is always a slight risk of complications when performing neurosurgery, as I’m sure you read in our consent form. The baseline provides a snapshot of you as you are prior to the procedure, to ensure there are no lasting changes to your memory, speech patterns or personality. There are several scheduled follow-ups where we will repeat the same interview to look for those deviations.”

“How often does that happen?” Will asked, wrapping his arms about himself and trying not to grimace at the over-brightness of the room. Photosensitivity was nothing new to him, having always avoided medical facilities as much as possible for that very reason.

“It’s exceedingly rare, I assure you,” she evaded smoothly and Will’s mouth tightened in displeasure.

“Consider me assured,” he replied flatly.

Again, Dr. Du Maurier’s carefully tranquil expression seemed to tighten, but she merely smiled and nodded toward him. “I’ll be back soon.”

It took some effort for Will not to toy with the IV line at the back of his hand, currently feeding him a saline drip to ensure his hydration prior to the procedure. Between the thin hospital gown, the catheter under his skin and the sensitivity of his newly shorn scalp, Will felt exposed in a way that had his shoulders hunching where he’d been sitting on the gurney for longer than seemed reasonable. He had briefly considered at least sitting in the chair, but he knew instinctively he’d only be asked to move. A brisk knock at last heralded the return of Dr. Du Maurier and the door opened before he could so much as grunt his assent.

“I apologize for the wait, Agent Graham,” she said, but Will didn’t have to be an empath to know that she was lying. He grit his teeth, refusing to show that her power play had worked

in rattling him as she stepped inside, followed by the same Medical Droid that had liberated Will of his hair.

The MD was an older model, as the confirmation of Artifices as sentient life forms twelve years earlier had caused manufacturers to cease the production of androids- robots with overtly humanoid aesthetics- almost entirely. Modern MD now tended to be robots of any number of appendages to aid their human counterparts, where this older model was bipedal and overtly feminine in design, though its chrome and silicon casing was skinless and unpainted but for the Lecter Ltd logo on its chest. An earlier look into the lenses of the MD's eyes had confirmed that it was not sentient, to Will's relief, and his empathy remained dormant in its presence.

It was clear that the MD would provide the recording for their interview as it stepped forward to hook itself up to the sensors it had placed on Will earlier, empty eyes focusing in on his face. That type of intense scrutiny might have been enough to unnerve most people, but to Will, the android was essentially a person shaped camera. Dr. Du Maurier was a far more unsettling presence as she drew her chair closer to the gurney and sat gracefully, crossing one knee over the other.

"Wouldn't it have been better to set a baseline *before* all this?" Will sniped at her, gesturing at himself.

"It's standard procedure," she replied, lips curving upward in what he supposed was meant to be a sympathetic smile and for the briefest of moments, Will's eyes rose to meet hers.

Satisfaction. Validation. Pride.

Tearing his gaze away immediately, Will grit his teeth at the way her emotions had flashed through him, revealing the lie for what it was. Will's attitude toward her since their first meeting had led the woman to take her revenge in what little way she could and he wished he could say that it surprised him. He rather tended to have that effect on people.

"Let's get started," she said, tapping at her data pad. "Please state your name."

"William Graham."

"Age?"

"Thirty-two."

"Gender?"

Will raised an eyebrow at her and said, "Male."

"Designation?"

"Does it matter?" Will ground out before he could think better of it and could feel the woman's eyes focus in on him intently.

“There are any number of reasons why it does, Agent Graham. The least of which would be to ensure the correct dosage of anesthetics during your procedure,” Dr. Du Maurier stated point of fact. “Designation?”

“Beta,” he lied, gripping the gurney beneath him in irritation.

Unsurprisingly, the MD immediately responded with, “This is not accurate. The blood sample collected from the patient contains trace amounts of chemicals consistent with those found in heat suppressants. Probability that the patient is omega: 93%.”

“That isn’t in your file, Agent Graham,” Du Maurier said, her voice going low in a way that would have betrayed her own designation if Will hadn’t pegged her as an alpha on sight.

“Maybe your droid is malfunctioning,” he replied, glaring at the woman’s chin.

“How long has it been since your last heat?” she wondered, tapping at the pad.

Vinyl creaked in protest under Will’s grip and he thought very seriously about getting up off the table and leaving this sordid mess behind him, field work be damned. The rise of artificial intelligence had completely changed the culture of human designation in ways that no one could have expected. Omega liberation in particular hit a surge in progressive thought as the option of utilizing an android for heat services suddenly meant that omega now had the option of an accompanied heat without fear of unwanted bonding or pregnancy. Before the official legislation declaring the sentience of Artifices had passed, those synthetic forms who had attained true consciousness worked with designation rights groups to push for greater inclusion in the existing laws.

An Artifice was not biological and thus had neither gender nor designation, and yet they were *alive* and could choose to imitate both or neither. The concept challenged traditionalist ways of thought more than any past designation rights movement had, and even the most conservative hold outs hesitated to rehash a belief in purely biological impulses that would have made humans seem *less* intellectual than Artifices.

Now, twelve years after Sentience Day and more than two decades since the introduction of artificial intelligence into the world, it was considered *extremely* vulgar to question a person’s designation, much less inquire after their *heat*. Suppressants, birth control and scent blockers no longer required invasive exams and annual check-ups, and instead were readily available in every corner shop, often manned by a droid or Artifice to avoid any possible confrontation over ones designation. While some exception to that had to be made for the medical field, Will had spent long enough burying his designation to know that the truth of his biology did not make *that* much of a difference.

“Not long enough,” he answered finally, tension roughening his voice even as it locked his body in place.

“Agent Graham-“ she began, but Will cut her off to say, “Ask your next question, doctor.”

Dr. Du Maurier’s mouth pinched, but she recovered quickly and moved on to ask, “What type of suppressants do you use? And yes, before you ask, it is both necessary *and* important for

you to disclose. The procedure could interfere with the effectiveness of an implant."

Sighing, Will scrubbed a hand over his face and grimaced at the way it tugged on the leads to his various sensors. "Oral," he said tiredly. "I take oral suppressants."

"And you've taken today's dosage?"

"Yes, but I took it dry," Will admitted, remembering the unpleasant aftertaste without his usual tea to wash it down.

"Thank you," the doctor murmured in concession to his honesty. "Where were you born?"

"Baton Rouge."

"Any siblings?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Will replied wryly, the tension fading by degrees now that the subject of his designation had passed.

"Extended family?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he repeated.

She glanced up at him and tapped at her screen before asking, "And your parents?"

"Dead or estranged," he said flatly.

"Do you have a partner?"

"I assume you don't mean Agent Katz," Will said sarcastically. "No, I'm not seeing anyone."

"Roommate?"

"Why does it seem like these questions are designed to determine whether or not I'll be missed?" he wondered archly, feeling rather weary of the reminder that he was, but for his colleagues at the ABAU, alone.

"As I explained, we're establishing a baseline, Agent Graham. If in a future interview you suddenly claim to have a large family or reveal that you've decided to begin living in a religious commune, it will be a clear sign of deviation," she explained calmly.

Though that was entirely logical, it did little in the way of putting Will at ease with the line of questioning, though he nodded at her to continue.

"What is your earliest memory?"

"Water," Will said after some hesitation.

"Can you be more specific?"

“Not really,” he admitted. “It’s less a memory than a…feeling.” The doctor gestured for him to elaborate on that and he sighed. “Water flowing away from me and just…taking everything with it. I feel safe. Peaceful.”

“Thank you, Agent Graham. Just one last question and we’ll be finished here,” she promised, lowering her data pad to consider him closely. “You’re walking down the street and you see a wounded bird in the grass. What’s your first thought?”

Will’s brow furrowed at the oddity of her question, but he shrugged somewhat as he answered, “It’s vulnerable. I want to help it.”

Dr. Du Maurier made a soft, non-committal sound and uncrossed her legs to stand. Taking this as some unspoken signal, the MD blinked once to cease the recording and began disconnecting Will from its sensors. “That’s the end of the interview. Do you have any questions before we begin the procedure?”

Licking his lips, which seemed to have gone paper dry in an instant, Will shivered a little at the chill of the exam room, though he’d been mostly unbothered by the temperature a moment before. “What exactly does that entail? The procedure.”

“The hardware of the ANA is like a web, which we carefully lay out around the brain. We do this through minimally invasive neuroendoscopy, drilling a series of small holes in your skull to ensure the neruonet is placed correctly. The holes will, of course, be sealed immediately upon completion of the procedure, so all you’ll ever see of it will be the microscars, and those will be hidden when your hair regrows.”

“And when I wake up the ANA will just be…there. In my head,” he stated flatly.

“I know that it must seem like a violation, but I can assure you, your life will be irrevocably changed from this point on. You’ll be a new man, a better agent.”

“Better how, exactly? Can it alter my thoughts?”

Dr. Du Maurier arched an eyebrow at him, her mouth curving with just the hint of a smile. “Of course not, Agent Graham. That would be unethical, even if that technology were currently available. It can perceive the outside world through your own sensory input, but the primary directive of your ANA is to constantly monitor your physiology to ensure optimal health and wellness.”

Will nodded a little in acknowledgement, but her words rang hollow when he was out of options, leaving him cold and empty. He didn’t want to be a new man. He didn’t want to *change.* “You said earlier that the interview helps you determine *which* ANA to pair me with. Does that mean they have different personalities?”

“To a point, yes. It is impossible to reach a certain point of artificial intelligence without deviations occurring between models. However, the ANAs are not truly sentient such as you would find in the mind of an Artifice and they are all bound by coding blocks to ensure that they operate within the intended parameters. There’s no danger of you losing your autonomy,” she promised confidently.

He hardly felt assured, but nodded, running a self-conscious hand over his shorn scalp. Soon his skull would be housing two minds. “And do you know now which of these *deviations* will best suit *me?*”

Staring at her chin as he was, Will could see the doctor’s lips curve into a cold, gratified smile. “Oh, yes, Agent Graham,” she purred softly. “I know exactly the right match for you.”

Consciousness returned like fog burning off a river in the sunlight and Will came back to himself to find that he was alone, but for the soft, rhythmic beeps that signaled the beat of his heart. Groggily, it took him longer than he would have preferred to work out where he was and how he had come to be there, his body unnaturally heavy from the anesthesia. Slowly, carefully, he managed to raise a hand to his head, feeling along the over-sensitive skin of his scalp. He might not have believed that the surgeons of Lecter Ltd had been inside his head at all, but for the tenderness of his bruised flesh and the faint circles of microscars he could feel at intervals, like a crown about his head. Pain was still some ways off, but Will thought he could feel it lingering beyond the wall of whatever drugs they’d given him, waiting to make itself known.

Lastly, he let his fingers fall to his temple and shuddered at the unnatural circle of silicone and acrylic that he found there, closing his eyes tightly for a moment. It was done. Will was officially a cybernetic. He thought he’d feel changed in some way, but with the exception of the drugs that left his body and mind in a haze of chemical assistance, he felt no different than he had walking in the building that morning.

Will debated with himself for a long moment before he finally called, “Hello?” his voice pitched low and reluctant.

/You don’t have to be afraid,/ a voice said and because Will knew that he was the sole occupant of the room, he knew that he must be hearing it within the confines of his own head. */I’m going to take excellent care of you./*

Shuddering involuntarily for the second time in as many minutes, Will tried not to listen to the spike of beeping from his side as his heart rate picked up. “Do you have to sound like that?” he growled out irritably, trading fear for grouchiness.

/Like what, Agent Graham?/ the ANA asked, its robotic voice perfectly neutral and horrifyingly devoid of humanity.

“Like a *thing*,” Will said scathingly. “Like a computer or… Look, you’re still an individual, aren’t you? I thought you were supposed to be deviated from one another.”

/That falls outside of my parameters, Agent Graham./

“What, sounding normal?” Will asked in exasperation.

/Sounding human,/ the ANA clarified and Will went cold at the words. */I am detecting that you are in distress, Agent Graham./*

"I'm *fine,* I'm just…adjusting," he sighed out and rubbed a hand over his scalp again self-consciously. "Am I allowed to change your parameters?"

/Yes,/ it confirmed and Will relaxed fractionally. */I will need your authorization before I may proceed with any action that contradicts the limitations placed on my coding./*

"Alright…" Will said slowly, tapping lightly at the base of his skull as he considered that. "Then I authorize you to…sound human."

/Do you have any preference as to what sort of human I should sound like?/

Snorting at that, Will shook his head, "Dealer's choice."

There was a brief pause before the ANA spoke again to ask, */Is this preferable, Agent Graham?/* and Will stiffened in surprise at the soft, inflected tenor.

"Um…yes, fine," he mumbled, a bit disoriented to 'hear' the distinctly masculine voice in his ear. After a moment's hesitation, his curiosity got the better of him and he asked, "Why the accent?"

/Why not?/ the ANA replied and Will shivered slightly at the way it seemed…amused. */Your vitals have evened out. Are you feeling more at ease, Agent Graham?/*

"Are you going to give me constant updates on my health, *Doctor?*" Will countered wryly, though a touch of bitterness crept into the words as he spat out the title.

/Not if it will bother you. My purpose is to ensure your health and comfort./

"Then assume I'll let you know if I actually need assistance," he said bluntly. "And please, just…call me Will. If you're going to be living in my head there's no point in being formal. You have my authorization if that's necessary."

/As you wish…Will./

Pushing himself more fully upright, Will looked around for the bin he'd stored his clothing in earlier and made a quick assessment on whether or not he could manage to leave the bed. He'd had more than enough of hospital gowns for one day. "So, what do I call you?" he asked, pushing back his blanket to carefully shift his legs over the side.

The ANA was silent for long enough that Will started to wonder whether he had gotten up too soon, but finally it said, */Names are not part of the ANA coding. You may give me one, if you so desire./*

Something about that didn't quite sit right with Will. As much as he disliked that he now had an artificial mind wired in to his own, he found the idea that they were placed under so many restrictions to be even more distasteful. That level of control edged too close to the slavery the Artifices had struggled under in the years leading up to Sentience Day. Still, choosing a name for his traveler didn't quite sit right with him either.

“We’ll just stick with ‘doctor’, unless you tell me otherwise,” he sighed and resisted the urge to scrub a hand over his head again.

Will managed to get himself over to his clothing and dressed before his MD returned, a little nauseated from the lingering anesthesia, but otherwise recovered. He felt immensely better to be in his own well-worn garments again, though he did find himself wishing he’d had the foresight to bring a hat of some kind. His skin felt chilled and sensitive without his hair and he could do without having the marks of his microscars exposed.

The outpatient process was far less intrusive than the intake had been and Will had only to make his follow up appointments and complete a joint survey with his ANA before he was shown back out to the waiting room. He didn’t see Dr. Du Maurier again, but he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised that she would be eager to be rid of him. Beverly had, in the time she had waited, laid claim to several chairs and was sprawled comfortably between them, staring at her pad. She came to her feet quickly when she saw Will and grinned at him.

“Love the new look, q-ball. Did you want to plot some world domination on the way home?”

“I regret you entirely,” Will lied, tightly gripping the tidy bag they had given him as some sort of consolation to the extremely invasive procedure he’d just undergone.

Snickering in amusement, Beverly led him out of the office and into the elevator, depressing the knob for the underground garage in which they had parked. She regarded him silently as they descended, nodding toward his head. “You’re alright though, aren’t you?”

“I’ll live,” he replied dryly, leaning against the side of the lift.

“How terrible for you. Is it supposed to be flashing like that?”

Will turned slightly to see that his LED indicator was pulsing pale blue in the dull reflection cast by the brushed steel of the elevator. He still hadn’t seen his reflection in full and the sight of the tech brand at his temple set him on edge. In response, the LED began flickering yellow and Will grit his teeth at the change.

“Doctor?” he ground out.

/The indicator is responding to your increasing levels of anxiety, Will. Blue is the standard display, yellow is used for distress and red indicates danger./

“Can you stop it?”

/I’m afraid the LED unit is not part of my operating system. It is a closed circuit sensor that reacts strictly based on your vital signs./

“Great,” Will intoned sarcastically, then rolled his eyes when Beverly quirked an expectant brow at him. He remembered that she could only hear one side of the conversation and sighed irritably. “It’s fine.”

“It sounds fine,” she agreed wryly, stepping out of the elevator when it reached the bottom level. “So…’doctor’?”

“They aren’t given names,” Will replied defensively, scowling. “I had to call him something.”

Beverly hummed in agreement, nodding as she called over her car with a click of her fob. “Makes sense, I guess,” she said, climbing into the car when it pulled up. She rifled through her cluttered back seats while Will got in and pulled up his address from the car’s GPS, tossing a black knit cap at him after a moment’s searching. “So…how are things going with Doctor Lecter?”

Frowning at her, Will looked down at the hat for a few moments hesitation and then pulled it on, tugging it low enough to cover the light of his LED. He typically didn’t like to touch items that belonged to other sentients due to the empathic residue left on personal effects, but he was used to Beverly’s particular brand of resonance. There was only the faintest impression of irritation left in the fabric, likely due to the weather or the traffic, given its purpose and location.

“Doctor Lecter?” he repeated, some of his tension fading now that his head wasn’t so exposed.

She shrugged and gestured toward the bag he had set aside as soon as he’d gotten into the car, the words ‘Lecter Ltd’ printed in artful lettering beneath the trademarked intersection of four antlers. “Seems only fitting.”

“If you say so. Things are…fine. We haven’t spoken much,” Will sighed, leaning back into his seat as the car moved out into the swell of midday traffic.

“What’s he like?”

“I don’t know. And frankly, I’m not that curious to find out, Bev,” he said tiredly. “I don’t find him very interesting. He’s not even a *‘he’*, it’s just a program.” It felt wrong to talk about the artificial mind hitched to his own as though it were not actively listening even now, but Will refused to dwell on the idea.

Beverly held up her hands in surrender, shaking her head. “Alright, Graham, I get it. You don’t want to talk about it, we won’t talk about it.”

Closing his eyes, Will pinched the bridge of his nose, a dull ache starting to make itself known through the fog of drugs still shrouding his pain. “Sorry,” he said shortly, knowing that it wasn’t fair to take out his frustration on his partner. “Thank you for…for this. All of this. It…would have been worse to go through alone.”

“Fuck, Will, weep all over me, why don’t you?” she teased gently and reached out to squeeze his shoulder, her care and worry clear even without his empathy making it known. “Why don’t you try to get some sleep? I’ll wake you when we get to the Ranch.”

As the population increased and available real estate dwindled, space had become a commodity that most people had given up on decades earlier. For Will, space wasn’t a needless luxury, but tantamount to his continued sanity in the wake of his empathy. It had

taken every bit of his savings and more than a few called in favors to procure the factory at the edge of No Man's Land, where pollution made human living impossible without the aid of a breather and a skinsuit.

The factory had once been a processing plant used to manufacture salad dressing and the interior walls had been painted to resemble a fertile valley of rolling green hills and blue skies dotted with white clouds. It was cracked and peeling now and the poor air quality had greyed the paint in places, but Will was fond of it all the same. Much of the equipment had been sold off or stolen years ago, but the cylindrical vats remained where they were welded to the floor. The largest and most prominent of these still bore an old vinyl decal that proclaimed it to be 'Ranch' and Beverly had referred to Will's home as such ever since she'd first laid eyes upon it.

Will woke on his own as they arrived, roused by the clamoring of seven robots whose sentry modes had gone haywire at the approaching car. "Sounds like your dogs got out again. I don't know how you live with that noise," Beverly complained, casting a wary eye out the window to look for them.

"You really shouldn't call them that," Will murmured, rubbing a tired hand over his face.

"Fine, it sounds like your *pack of stray robots* got out again," she corrected and rolled her eyes. "I'm not getting out if they're running wild."

"They wouldn't hurt you, Bev," he insisted, gathering up his bag and handing over her hat.

She shook her head and pushed it back at him. "Keep it, it's cold out and I know you haven't got the heat on in there."

Will thanked her and covered up his head again, getting out of the car. "I'll see you tomorrow," he told her firmly, knowing that she would prefer he took a couple days to recover.

Sighing at him, she nodded and waved a hand at him. "God forbid you spend one more day out of the field… Fine, tomorrow then, but I'm not letting Jack grant you access to the mainframe until then. Go round up your murder bots."

With a disparaging look, Will closed the door and waited until she had driven off to do just that. He whistled sharply to quiet the racket the robots were making and they crowded around him eagerly when he unlocked the padlock that kept the outermost doors of the factory closed. Usually he entered through the remodeled offices that made up his rooms, but he didn't want any of his pack to accidentally tear through the walls in their eagerness to greet him.

Most people, like Beverly, were put off by the droids that Will had been steadily bringing home for the last few years. They ranged in size and shape and purpose from Zoe, a tiny, tumbling alarm clock, to Harley, a hulking mechanic droid. Broken and discarded, they would have ended up in the junkyards or rounded up for the underground robot cage matches that largely went ignored by the authorities. Instead, Will had brought them home to be cleaned and repaired to the best of his ability.

Beverly had not been the first to name the motley crew his ‘dogs’, but Will didn’t openly encourage the use of the term, even if he privately found it fitting. Without the protections afforded to the Artifice classification, the robots could be terminated if thought to have Wakened. It was still a point of high contention among lawmakers, but for the time being there was no great push to extend such considerations toward non-humanoid robots. Not all of Will’s dogs had gained sentience enough to earn them a termination, and for most of them it was just the faintest pulse of awareness, but Winston…he was special.

Relief. Reunion. Concern.

“I’m alright, Winston,” Will assured the droid, nudging the others back away from the door so that he could close and lock it.

Stranger. Concern. Threat?

Looking up in surprise, Will saw that Winston waited warily at the back of the pack, watching him closely. Unlike the others, which were mostly quadrupeds but otherwise bore no actual resemblance to animals, Winston actually *was* a canine droid. Nearly half of his skin and fur had been lost, revealing the mechanical structures beneath, but Will had done his best at restoring what remained. Will couldn’t be certain what happened to him before he found the robot on the streets, but he thought that Winston must have run from wherever he’d been when he’d Wakened. He could only hope that the obvious abuse he’d suffered had occurred before Waking, but Will suspected that it might have come after the fact.

“You can sense him?” Will wondered, unsure whether he felt more unnerved or amazed by the idea. Several of the others must have picked up on the presence of the ANA as well, because they backed away from Will, regarding him cagily.

/With your authorization, I can communicate with them, Will,/ the ANA offered.

“You won’t…override them, will you?” Will asked doubtfully.

/Not unless you ask me to./

He hesitated a moment, mulling it over, but then nodded once. “Go ahead, Doctor Lecter. I’ll authorize it.” Will watched in fascination as the pack all perked up as though listening to something and even Winston had his head cocked slightly. After a few moments, they all flashed various lights and indicators at him and then turned to head off into the factory. Winston hung back long enough to give Will a long, soulful look before following after them.

Relief. Concern. Acceptance.

“Huh,” Will grunted, raising an eyebrow. “What did you say to them?”

/I explained that my purpose is to see to your health and comfort./

It warmed Will somewhat to know that his strays accepted Doctor Lecter on the basis of his personal wellbeing, though a part of him wondered if it should worry him how easy they were to sway. He trailed after the dogs toward the back of the plant and the offices he’d

converted into his living quarters, beginning to relax in earnest now that he was safe within his own space. Here there was no insistent buzzing of active minds beyond the innocuous pulses of his dogs; no maelstrom of emotion to navigate or social niceties to remember. Safe in the privacy of the Ranch, he could let go of all that and just be himself a little while before he had to throw himself into the world once more.

The door to his living space was open, which meant that he'd forgotten to lock it and thus Harley or Max had worked the handle to release the pack into the Ranch proper. Will didn't mind it really, which is why he didn't check the lock as closely as he should, his greatest concern being that they might be discovered by some passerby and deactivated while he was away. The proximity to No Man's Land kept people away for the most part, but even an Artifice might decide to put them down if given the chance. Many Artifices were too concerned with the possibility of having their rights revoked to risk 'lesser' robots running wild.

/Might I ask you something?/ Doctor Lecter queried softly as Will got his boots off and traded his coat for a sweater.

"Technically you just did," Will pointed out, moving into his kitchen to make himself some tea. As Beverly had guessed, he had not left the heat on in his absence and the cold fogged his breath. "Just ask if there's anything you want to know. I'll tell you if I want you to stop."

/How is it you communicated with Winston earlier?/

Brow furrowing slightly, Will considered the question as he turned on his filter and filled the electric kettle with water. "Are you required to report my responses to anyone?"

/No, Will. You are my only designated user. Your information is strictly confidential, with the exception of a medical emergency./

"And how much information were you given about me?"

/I have your most recent medical information, as well as the user profile that you submitted upon signing the release form./

"So you know that I'm classified as an empath," Will surmised, getting his teacup as the water heated.

/Yes,/ Doctor Lecter confirmed. */But though I have that information, I have no real frame of reference for it./*

It wasn't too surprising, because empaths were so rare to find in the population, and rarer still to *admit* to their affliction, that there had been little opportunity for study among the scientific community. "I can read emotions in sentient beings, typically through eye contact or physical touch unless I am…compromised," he explained. "My abilities don't discriminate between human or Artifice…or other life forms that have Wakened."

/An extraordinary gift,/ the ANA complimented him and Will wasn't entirely certain how he felt about that. */You knew that Winston could detect my presence because he has a sentient*

mind./

"Yes," Will confirmed and poured his newly heated water over the condensed flavor capsule of his tea. He stared down at the cup and watched as it darkened. "Will whiskey react negatively to the drugs in my system?"

/Yes, Will. In general, alcohol should not be consumed in conjunction with medication,/ the ANA scolded him and Will snorted in amusement. /However, I can simulate the effects of mild inebriation with your authorization./

He had mostly been joking about the alcohol, but that statement surprised him. "Seriously?"

/Though the primary purpose is to protect your mind in case of a traumatic event, I have the ability to stimulate the release of dopamine./

Picking up his tea, Will seriously considered the possibility of it as he returned to the main room and settled into his chair. "No," he decided finally, sighing almost regretfully. "That… sounds like a bad idea." Will honestly wasn't certain he could trust himself not to abuse that particular feature of his new accessory and changed the subject instead. "Did the dogs have anything to say when you spoke to them?"

/Max is low on hydraulic fluid, likely from a leak in the rear quadrant, and Buster has something lodged inside the forward intake valve./

"They all told you their names?" Will asked in surprise, smiling down at his tea where it was warming his hands.

/You assigned them each identifying nomenclatures, so they use them./

That gave Will pause and he scratched lightly at the back of his neck where the knit cap itched slightly against his skin. "I…should I give you a real name? I know that I said I would leave it up to you, but…"

/Doctor Lecter is perfectly suitable, Will,/ the ANA assured him. */As Agent Katz suggested earlier, it is…fitting./*

The rest of Will's evening was surprisingly…nice. Far more so than he would have anticipated with a stranger in his midst. After going through the bag of promotional material he'd received with some disgust, Will had settled in with his dogs and worked through their repairs with Dr. Lecter's guidance. He would have eventually discovered their faults on his own, but having some direction on the matter was a welcome change. It was not wholly unpleasant to carry on a conversation without Will's avoidance of eye contact and lack of social niceties to get in the way. He was well aware that he was an irritable bastard at best and downright rude at worst, but safe within his domain Will found that he could relax into the flow of dialogue.

He had begged off dinner while his stomach was still unsettled from the anesthesia, but Dr. Lecter was far more insistent about breakfast the following morning. Rather than argue against reports of his blood sugar and energy levels, Will chewed through a ration bar and washed it and his daily suppressant down with another cup of tea.

/Though that appears to contain all the necessary nutrients required to maintain your health, I do recommend that you consider the acquisition of real food,/ Dr. Lecter lectured as Will let the pack out into the factory and started to dress.

"First you complain because I haven't eaten and now you're complaining because of *what* I've eaten," Will grumbled, buttoning up his shirt. "I don't remember signing up for marriage."

/I can have a copy of the consent form sent to your data pad, if you like,/ the ANA commented dryly, startling a laugh out of Will. */With your authorization, I can procure more palatable sustenance for you./*

Shaking his head, Will shrugged and bent to pull on his boots. "Whatever makes you happy, Doctor Lecter. As long as you stay within my budget, I'll let you to handle the menu."

With his ANA in place, Will was granted authorization to operate his car again, something he had thought to be particularly ridiculous given that the car could drive *itself*. Dr. Lecter was quiet during the drive, but the purchase notifications Will received on his data pad showed that he was clearly not idle. Not bothering to go through the receipts for now, Will left him to it, both amused and annoyed that of all the possible neural assistants he could have ended up with, his was apparently a *gourmand*.

Beverly was waiting for him when he pulled into his usual spot beside hers and Will tried again to return her hat to her. "Jesus, Graham, just keep it until your hair comes back in. No one wants to look at that," she teased, gesturing vaguely at his bald head.

Shoving it back on his head, Will glared at her ear and pretended that he wasn't grateful to have it as he followed her into the building. "What do we have?"

"Good morning, Will," Beverly said sarcastically, badging her way inside. "I slept very well, thank you for asking. Though I do have this tension in my neck..."

"Katz," Will growled at her, unamused.

She smirked at him and used her badge again at the elevator, authorizing the lift to access the floor dedicated to the ABAU. "I'm sure you'll be shocked to learn that Jack wants to see you before anything else."

Will grimaced at that, folding his arms and hunching in on himself to keep from touching anyone else on the elevator. "Of course he does. Pep talk, case or lecture?"

"Oh, definitely a lecture."

“I have to requalify as a field agent!” Will burst out angrily when he shoved his way into their office nearly half an hour later. He knew that his indicator was flashing red even without having caught a glimpse of it reflected back at him from the chrome and glass walls of the ABAU.

Glancing up at him, Beverly’s eyes flicked briefly toward the LED and she arched a brow, setting down her pad. “Well, obviously.”

“You *knew* about this?” he accused, so livid that he actually locked eyes with her for a moment.

Affection. Guilt. Doubt.

“You’re not sure of my capability anymore,” Will realized, his anger fading to shock.

Wincing, Beverly dropped her gaze to keep him from reading her. “You don’t fight fair, Will.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” he demanded. “If you were really that concerned that I wouldn’t be able to handle myself in the field, you should have told me.”

“I *did* tell you, but you didn’t want to listen. What happened when you were sick was… terrifying. When we go out there, I *need* to know that you have my back. That you can still operate the way you used to. I need that assurance just as much as I need to know that your Doctor Lecter isn’t going to let that happen to you again.”

“You put in the recommendation to pull my quals,” Will said, feeling almost numb in the sudden absence of his anger.

“I suggested it and Jack agreed with me,” Beverly affirmed, getting to her feet. “I don’t want to lose you as my partner, Will. Not over this and not out there when shit goes down. I’m sorry that I didn’t warn you sooner, I just…I guess I was hoping that you might take a little time to readjust before you tried to throw yourself back in the mix.”

He took a slow, calming breath and then nodded in acceptance. “I understand why you did it. I don’t like it and I don’t *appreciate* it…but I understand. But I need *you* to understand that I went through *this-“* Will gestured to the LED flickering yellow now at his brow. “-so that I could keep working. In the *field.* Whatever lives are lost while I’m spinning my wheels for the next few weeks? That’s on you.”

Beverly flinched at that, but then jerked her head in a quick nod. “Okay. Do you want-“

“No,” Will cut her off, shaking his head. “I don’t…I need some time, Bev.” Gathering up his jacket and data pad, he headed for the door. “I’ll see you when it’s done.”

/Are you alright?/ Dr. Lecter asked as Will headed for the elevator.

“Do my *vital signs* say that I’m alright?” Will muttered sarcastically, hitting the knob for the training levels with more force than was strictly necessary.

/Your vitals indicate that you are in minor distress, but less so than you were before speaking with Agent Katz. Do you believe that Agents Crawford and Katz have colluded against you in error?/

Sighing, Will thumped his head back against the wall of the lift, glad that no one else had joined him in his descent. “That’s the worst part of this mess, because I’m pretty sure I agree with them.” Scrubbing a hand tiredly over his face, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “They should have brought it up with me and I…I should have expected it. I already had to retake my aptitude tests and polygraph just to keep my job with the ABAU.”

/You don’t trust easily and now you feel that those you placed your trust in have betrayed you./

“Don’t tell me you’re programmed to be my psychiatrist, too,” Will derided, lowering his voice when he stepped out onto the training level.

/Your mental health is included in my purview, Will,/ Dr. Lecter pointed out. */What will re-qualifying as a field agent entail?/*

Getting out his data pad, Will brought up the testing schedules to see where there was still space available. “I’ll have to complete the range qualifiers in the handgun, shotgun, and rifle, pass both the armed and unarmed combat trials and go through the simulators,” he muttered, keeping his voice down. With his indicator mostly hidden beneath Beverly’s knit cap, Will didn’t want to come off as unusually unstable. Not until he had requalified, anyway. “The simulators and combat trials test me against both human and Artifice opponents.”

/Does your work often put you in harm’s way?/

“No, more often than not there’s a team on standby specifically to help with bringing in a suspect, but there’s always the possibility of things not going as planned.”

/And are you required to do this without any assistance from me?/

Will startled at that, because he hadn’t even considered the option of utilizing the new tech nestled up against his brain. Given that cybernetics outnumbered organics these days, there was no way to enforce a rule against utilizing implants during testing. After all, those same implants would be used in the field just as readily. “Actually…no,” he admitted and smiled slightly. “No I am not.”

Though Will felt fairly confident in saying that he wouldn’t have needed his ANA’s assistance in requalifying, he certainly couldn’t deny the advantages presented by it. At the range, he took Dr. Lecter’s suggestions on how to adjust his stance and correct his aim, the combination of which moved Will up in a qualifying score from Sharpshooter to Expert. In the simulator, Dr. Lecter started out by verbally calling out targets before he finally just gave the ANA authorization to highlight them in his vision, allowing Will to react far more quickly in discerning threats. But the most significant benefit of his implant came in the combat trials.

Given the nature of his empathy, hand-to-hand combat had always been Will's weakest area. The snarl of his opponent's emotions were thrust into the foreground of his mind as soon as he made contact with them, overriding training and muscle memory both. After the easy victories of his first week requalifying, it was frustrating to suddenly be hemmed up by the peculiarity of his ability.

After the second lost match, in which Dr. Lecter's advice made little difference as to the outcome, he asked, */Can you explain what it is you are experiencing?/*

Scrubbing a hand towel over his shorn head, Will grumbled, "Aren't you supposed to be the expert, *Doctor* Lecter?"

/I can see that your anterior insular cortex, which already operates at higher than average levels, becomes unusually active the moment you make physical contact./

Sighing, Will watched as someone else moved to the mats, moving away from the group and murmuring low so that he wouldn't be overheard. "I can't block them out when I'm touching them. I feel *everything*."

/It overwhelms your ability to react? Is that not concerning in the field?/

"It's different when I'm out there, when it's a suspect," he explained, then nodded slightly toward the other agents. "They aren't my enemies…when I don't perceive them as a true threat, separating myself from them is…challenging."

/Perhaps it would be better to start perceiving everyone as an enemy and spare yourself the headache,/ Dr. Lecter mused and Will snorted softly. */I believe I could be of some assistance here./*

His brow furrowed slightly at that, remembering how Dr. Lecter had mentioned being able to alter his brain chemistry. "How? By subduing my empathy?"

/While I do believe I could do such a thing, altering the activity of your anterior insular cortex could result in a change of personality. Potentially even the development of a mental illness. Instead I propose that you give me authorization to…pilot./

"Pilot?" Will repeated, frowning. "Pilot…my body?"

/Yes, Will. I could take control of your body in those moments when your empathy becomes too overwhelming./

Breath catching in surprise, Will went very still at the suggestion and a wave of cold apprehension washed over his skin. The thought of losing control over his body was far too close to the seizures and blackouts he'd suffered through when he'd fallen ill, and that he might be fully *conscious* when it occurred this time turned his stomach.

"No, Doctor Lecter," he said finally when he found his voice again, shuddering slightly. "Not…not yet. I…need to think on that."

Will did think on it quite a lot over the next few days as he failed time and again to make any headway in his unarmed combat trials. The armed combat trials had been almost laughably easy in comparison, as Will's drive to disable his adversaries without resorting to physical contact led him to take down his human opponents with near brutal efficiency. The Artifice instructors were nigh impossible for human agents to beat, but Will managed to hold his own long enough to requalify. Field agents for the ABAU were required to be partnered specifically because it was too dangerous to take on an Artifice alone.

Entering the training hall, Will's mouth tightened when he recognized the human facilitator for that day's unarmed combat testing. A fervent organic, Special Agent Gavin Reed was a prejudicial asshole who seemed fairly determined to abhor anything that fell outside his opinion of how the world ought to be. That he was down in the Training Division instead of up in the Human Crimes Unit suggested that he'd likely undergone some sort of reprimand for his behavior recently. Aggression and intolerance in the workplace often led to such assignations in order to foster a renewed sense of inclusivity, much to Will's consternation. As an empath, Will fell well outside of Reed's acceptable world view and the man had never hesitated to make his disgust on the subject known.

/Is everything alright, Will?/ Dr. Lecter queried him. */Your readings indicate a higher than usual stress response./*

"So it's true then," Reed's voice cut across the room before Will could answer the ANA. Will could feel the man focus in on his LED indicator as Reed walked toward him, lip curled in disgust. "I heard you went and got an upgrade, Graham. Should have known a freak like you couldn't cut it as a true human."

/Ah, I see./

Not bothering to respond to either of them, Will moved past Reed to set his bag down along the far wall and join the line of agents waiting for the day's testing to begin. Snorting with contempt, Reed let him go, barking at the stragglers filing in until they hurried to join the others. Several of them were now regarding their instructor with unease at the aggression he was already displaying, glancing surreptitiously toward Will. Having lived his whole life dealing with stronger insults than 'freak', Will kept his expression blank and folded his arms, determined to get through this mess as quickly as possible.

Unlike most agents, and indeed the majority of the human populace, Reed refused to wear scent blockers and the sharp tang of his alpha pheromones did nothing to ease the tension in the room as he paced before them. Will was half-tempted to simply leave rather than deal with the odious man, but doing so would mean that he'd have to delay his reinstatement another week. He could only be glad that Reed had no way of knowing his own designation, as it would only serve to make him completely intolerable.

"Alright, twat waffles, it's not like you don't fucking know why you're here today," Reed snapped at them, folding his arms across his chest. "Working in the field means you might get physical with a perp. If you don't want to wind up dead, you've got to do that without falling to pieces." A smirk cracked through his scowl and he looked at Will. "Agent Graham, since you seem to have such a problem with that, why don't you go first?"

Will's jaw went tight, but he refused to be baited as the other agents gave him uncertain looks, stepping forward even as they moved back to the edge of the mat. Already the man wore his aggression about him like a cloak, exacerbated by the lack of scent blockers, and it was difficult to keep his body from tensing instinctively in the presence of an alpha eager for violence. Reed had no way of knowing that presenting so unfriendly a target would actually work to Will's advantage regarding his empathy, but only if he didn't let himself become distracted by instinct.

For all his bravado, Reed was an excellent fighter and hardly telegraphed his movement as he came for Will, striking fast and hard with the intent to *hurt*. A small gasp worked out of him when Reed's fist caught him hard enough to force the air from his lungs and had Will eaten beforehand, he might have brought it up again. There was nothing instructive about the way he struck at Will, deliberately searching out those places that would cause the most pain without being overt in his savagery. Each time their bodies made contact, Will could feel that desire simmering just under the alpha's skin, that need to lay him low, to humiliate him. Reed's anger and resentment over his own situation sought satisfaction through the easy target he perceived in Will. The ugliness of it dragged at Will, coiling around him and though he'd gotten in more than a few vicious strikes of his own, the miasmic sludge of Reed's emotions sent him painfully down onto the mat for the third time since they'd started.

Pinning him there, Reed's breath came hot against his ear and neck as he spoke low enough that his voice wouldn't carry and Will could feel the perverse gratification in him with every word. "I don't know how you even passed this trial the first time, freak. Unless you got your qualification on your *knees*."

"Fuck this," Will ground out through his teeth, his own anger swirling into the cloud of smug satisfaction rolling off Reed. He felt nearly feral with his need to best the man, to show him exactly how dangerous Will could be. "Authorization granted."

Dr. Lecter didn't ask for clarification and Will's body abruptly went limp and then surged forward to break Reed's hold on him. The speed of it nearly took his breath away in shock, highlighted with a sense of fulfillment at the way Reed's eyes widened in surprise as Dr. Lecter caught hold of his arm and twisted, drawing the man across his body and tumbling him none too gently down onto the mat. Still gripping his arm, Dr. Lecter pinned Reed down with a knee to his spine as he locked the limb to just before the point of dislocation. The entire evolution had taken seconds.

"*Fucking shit*, Graham!" Reed wheezed out, slapping his free hand to the mat. "I fucking *yield,* you *psychopath*."

Abruptly in control again, Will released his hold and quickly stood, backing away several paces. He thought that he should be panting, though he barely felt as though exerted himself at all.

"Are we done?" he snapped coldly, giving Reed a hard look even as his heart raced with vindication.

"Yes! Fuck!" Reed growled, rolling his shoulder in the socket and giving Will a hateful look. "If Crawford wants his mad dog back on the streets, then that's his problem."

“See that I don’t become *yours*, Agent Reed,” Will told him darkly and got his bag, leaving the room without a backward glance.

/You have several contusions, Will,/ Dr. Lecter pointed out as Will immediately headed for one of the other training halls. */I would advise seeking a cold compress before risking further injury./*

“I shouldn’t have let my pride keep me from using you to my advantage,” Will ground out under his breath, nodding to the Artifice instructor as he got out his pad and signed himself into the exam roster. “We’re finishing this *today*.”

/Will-/

“If you’re so concerned, Doctor Lecter, then I advise *you* not to let me get injured,” he cut the ANA off, a challenge in his tone. Taking his place alongside the other candidates, Will ignored their sidelong looks and instead watched and waited for his turn.

Agent Markus, a masculine Artifice with a shorn head to rival Will’s own, had a placid expression that gave him an air of being entirely unconcerned by any of them. It was a common surety that many Artifice agents had, given that they were hindered only by their current state of repair, rather than any biological limitations. Markus had, in fact, been Will’s instructor back when he’d first become an agent as well, having always been far more interested in educating candidates on Artifice rights and relations than he was in serving in an active capacity.

Unlike human combat trials, which focused on offense and overpowering ones opponent, the Artifice trials were based largely on defense and evasion and were scored on a timing system. In the field, allowing an Artifice to get a hold usually meant a death sentence, as they were stronger and faster. To pass the trial, one had to successfully evade capture for at least twenty seconds, which was the minimum charge time required for the miniature EMP grenades all human agents carried.

Still heated from his encounter with Reed, Will found himself for a moment wishing that this *weren’t* a defensive trial; that he could rid himself of the lingering pool of aggression laid in him by the alpha. He felt almost trapped within his own skin and the thrill of victory from Dr. Lecter’s intervention. Where he expected to feel shaken by the loss of control, Will found instead that he felt almost…liberated. The ANA could not do anything with his body that *Will* was not equally capable of, given time and practice.

His mind was roiling when Markus called him forward, but his body felt strangely calm as he fell into a defensive stance, readying himself. When the Artifice came for him, Will found himself moving *toward* the threat rather than away from it and suddenly he wasn’t sure whether his movements were his own, or Dr. Lecter’s. It hardly mattered either way.

Ducking sharply under the Artifice’s reach, Will drove his foot into the back of Markus’ knee to buckle the joint, then surged upward to seize hold of his arm, using the android’s weight and momentum to throw him to the ground. Following the motion, Will brought his own knee to press into his throat, then thrust his hand toward the Artifice’s abdomen, halting just before he hit the power casing that would temporarily deactivate the android. The training hall went

utterly still, the silence broken only by the faint chime that denoted the passing of the twenty second limit.

Will *was* panting now from the quickness of his movements and he stared down at Markus in some shock, levering himself up after a moment. He didn't offer the Artifice a hand up, given that the android outweighed him by nearly twice his bodyweight, but Markus rose fluidly and with little effort, regarding Will closely. Their eyes met briefly and Will took in the surprise and curiosity of his emotions before averting his gaze, realizing for the first time that he'd completely blocked them out prior to that point.

"Your new partner suits you," Markus commented quietly after a moment and Will stiffened in surprise, barely resisting the urge to touch the LED indicator at his brow. "It's good that you can place your trust in him."

"I…I barely know him," Will said in some denial, folding his arms across his chest. With the adrenaline fading from his system, the aches and pains brought on by his encounter with Reed were beginning to make themselves known.

"Well…I'd say you have time for that to change." He smiled slightly, then gave Will a more solemn look, his voice low. "I know it's not something your superiors would want you to consider…but using an EMP would kill *him* too."

A cold feeling of dread settled into Will at that and he shook his head slightly, brow furrowed. "He isn't *alive*, Markus."

Sighing, Markus shook his head as though Will had disappointed him, giving him a cool, yet pitying, look. "I've updated your record, Agent Graham. You're cleared to return to the field."

The Drip was so named for the row of glass cold coffee drippers that lined the back wall, carefully manned by an Artifice called Dutch. It was unclear whether this was actually the Artifice's chosen name or if it had been born due to the centuries old Dutch style coffee that they served, though it was only one of many caffeinated beverages available. Dutch was obsessed with the art of brewing and the dedication they had put into their craft had made The Drip one of the most successful Artifice run small businesses on the eastern seaboard. The average human couldn't afford real coffee on a regular basis and had to rely instead upon the more affordable caff, yet Dutch somehow managed to make even that more palatable than most cafés. Coffee beans were exorbitantly expensive, but many of the federal workers and business types who ventured over to the café still splurged on the decadence once or twice a month. There were worse things to spend twenty-five credits on.

Beverly heaved a sigh of annoyance as they stepped into the café, eyeing the absurdity of the line. "Fucking *tourists*," she growled in displeasure, folding her arms. "They're probably just trying to get free samples."

"Mm," Will grunted in commiseration, well used to this song and dance by now. "I'll save you a seat."

Making up with Beverly had been rather uneventful, given that Will found himself begrudgingly grateful for the two weeks he'd spent adapting to his new partnership with Dr. Lecter. He would never put it in so many words, not when he was still annoyed that she'd gone to Jack behind his back, but even a grumpy bastard such as himself could admit that it would have been reckless to return to the field untested. Their reunion itself consisted only of Beverly shoving his newly restored badge at him, insulting what little hair he'd managed to grow in her absence, then declaring that it was Coffee Day and crowding him toward the exit.

Abandoning his partner now to her queue, Will made his way to the corner of the café furthest from the line, where he usually preferred to sit. Most patrons preferred to be out by the windows or on the terrace, where their expensive indulgence could be seen and envied by passerby, meaning that Will usually had his pick of the faux leather armchairs in the back corner. The distance from the main doors and the proximity to the drip counter had the added benefit of being all but saturated in the smell of fresh beans, slow roasted and ground throughout the day.

/Agent Katz seems particularly aggravated today,/ Dr. Lecter observed quietly.

Snorting softly, Will sank into a chair and got out his data pad. "It's Coffee Day," he said in answer, as though that were explanation enough.

/And this is a source of aggravation for her?/

"This is a source of *caffeine* for her," Will replied wryly. "She forgoes any caff on Coffee Day. It leaves her 'aggravated', as you say."

/I see…is it unusual for the line to be this long?/

"Of course not, but she somehow manages to 'forget' that every time we come here."

The ANA was quiet for a long moment while Will logged into the ABAU server, before he said, */There are any number of beneficial antioxidants to be found in genuine coffee, Will. You should consider-/*

"Thank you, Doctor Lecter," Will cut him off before he could devolve into a lecture, rolling his eyes. "I'm fine."

Will never availed himself of the coffee at The Drip, but he was usually dragged along whenever Beverly made her bi-monthly run to moan luridly over a cup while he sighed and scowled at whatever he had brought with him to read. Caff generally aggravated his empathy to the point where he started picking up residual emotions even without touch or eye-contact, so he tended to avoid it and other sources of caffeine. He did, at least, appreciate the scent of roasted beans. It was rare to find something genuine, something *real* in a world of strictly regulated resources and that authenticity appealed to him enough that he continued to venture in despite the crowd.

Usually he would read for pleasure while he was here, glad for the brief respite from the stress of work, but after the months spent out of commission and the last two weeks of jumping through hoops to requalify, Will wanted nothing so much as to get caught up on the

cases he'd been locked out of. The guilt of lives lost during his convalescence still weighed heavily upon him, no matter how he'd tried to lay it on Beverly in his anger or how illogical it was to carry the weight of others' transgressions. Grimly, he started to scan through crime scene mappings from the recent case Beverly had been working with Hank and Conner, the only human/Artifice team in the ABAU. The three of them had been looking into a series of murders in which the victims had all been human and were believed to have been killed by an Artifice, but the recordings of the crime scenes themselves didn't give him much to go on. His empathy needed some form of tangible connection before it would give him insight.

/There's a pattern. It's…art./

"What?" Will started in surprise, staring down at his data pad. "What do you mean?"

/It would perhaps be easier that I show you, but I would-/

"Require authorization," Will guessed and gestured at the pad. "Go ahead."

/Thank you, Will,/ the ANA said politely and there was a brief pause while he connected to Will's pad. Once he had synced, Dr. Lecter began sorting the crime scene layouts rapidly, discarding two of the victims entirely before he had rotated the angles specifically and cut them together to arrange a sort of macabre tableau.

"That looks…familiar, somehow," Will said with a frown, leaning closer to his data pad.

/It is Michelangelo,/ Dr. Lecter explained and accessed the Net interface to bring up an image of a Renaissance fresco, overlaying it on the crime scene photos. */'The Creation of Adam' from the Sistine Chapel, which collapsed in 2034. Only God and Adam are missing./*

Will traced his fingers lightly over the layered image, noticing the precision with which the victims had been placed, as though with a computer's exactness. "Adam is the killer," he said with a surety. "However these victims are linked, he believes that they're responsible for his 'creation'." He tapped the supine depiction of God with a finger. "He's saving his 'God' for last, he'll be the final victim." His heart rate picked up with the certainty that he was on the right track and he started bringing up the victim's profiles. "Do you see any correlation between them?"

/None thus far, but I am running a search using the Net. Unfortunately, I am unable to access certain databases, such as the ABAU mainframe./

"I'd have to get Jack's authorization for that, but I doubt he'd go for it. He doesn't trust easy when it comes to the keys to the kingdom." Tapping thoughtfully at the side of the pad, Will frowned in thought. "You're sure the two you've discarded couldn't be failed attempts at any of the angels?"

/I find that unlikely./ he told Will dismissively, bringing the other two crime scenes back up and rotating them to show that they did not align perfectly into the fresco as the others had. */If I had to guess, I would think that these were done by someone aware of the killings. Someone who wanted to us to think that they belonged to the same killer./*

“If you had to *guess?*” Will repeated, raising an eyebrow at the data pad in lieu of being able to look at Dr. Lecter. “I wouldn’t think an artificial mind would resort to speculation.”

/Would you prefer that I give you the probability that I am right? You have shown preference that I respond in a human manner, Will./

Smiling a little, Will huffed softly in amusement and inclined his head. “Fair enough, Doctor Lecter. Then what is your best *guess* as to how this second killer would have found out about the particulars of the case?”

/Seeing the firewalls and intrusion AI the ABAU has set up around its access points, I would have to suggest that either the second killer is familiar with the motivations of the first…or that they have been reading the blog of one Fr3ddi3 L0und5./

“*What?*” he said sharply and could see the LED at his temple give off yellow pulses in the reflective surface of the data pad as he hurriedly pulled up his browser. Guessing at his intent, Dr. Lecter brought the page up before Will could finish searching the link and he swore violently to see that several of the crime scenes had recorded and uploaded below a lurid header that read, ‘ARTIFICE SERIAL KILLER STRIKES AGAIN: WHERE IS THE ABAU?’. The footage itself was clearly pulled from ocular lenses and Will was, regrettably, very familiar with their owner. “That damn…is she *trying* to incite violence against Artifices?”

/You’re familiar with the author?/ Dr. Lecter asked and Will snorted derisively.

“You could say that. I’m sure if you search through her archives, you’ll find some very flattering pieces about *me*,” he grumbled, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Bev had to have known about this, damn it…why didn’t she tell me?”

Fr3ddi3 L0und5 was young for an Artifice, having Wakened in the last six years or so. Her body, however, was old enough to have still been constructed in the humanoid fashion and so like many Artifice, she chose to present herself with a gender, for all intents and purposes living her life as a human female. The only consideration to her species had been in her name, which she had created from her model number: 3305. Will wasn’t sure what sort of android she might have been before developing sentience, but given the quality of her ocular lenses and her tenacious drive for a story, he suspected she might have once been used to conduct interviews. But much like asking a human their designation, it was wholly offensive to ask an Artifice their manufactured purpose.

/She seems to think that you are a danger to the general public, Will./

“Fr3ddi3 is under the impression that choosing to remain organic makes one prejudiced against the synthetic. Add my empathy onto that and there is no chance that woman will ever trust me,” he said bitterly, long used to the suspicions cast against him for his ‘gift’. “So our second killer could have seen her articles and decided to join in out of what, admiration?”

/In scanning the news I have seen that there has been a rise of anti-human activity…but perhaps there is a more complex reasoning behind the murders. Perhaps the second killer is acquainted with the first./

“Perhaps the second killer is ‘God’,” Will mused softly.

“Do I even want to know?” Beverly asked him as she carefully sat down in the chair across from Will, cradling a small cup of cold coffee.

“Doctor Lecter and I have been working your case while you were…*indulging*,” Will told her with a pointed look at said indulgence.

Grimacing, Beverly gave him a hard look and her eyes narrowed suspiciously at him. “If you even think about ruining this moment with shop talk, I will actually murder you.”

/Agent Katz does not appear to be lying,/ Dr. Lecter advised with a faint note of amusement that Will couldn’t be sure he didn’t imagine.

Rolling his eyes, Will gestured at his partner magnanimously and re-focused his attention on the victim profiles while Beverly took a small sip and moaned. There were times he hated Coffee Day.

With a white knuckled grip on his data pad, Will stared very hard at the image of water flowing across the display and tried to ignore the yellow cast of his LED unit on the reflective surface. The waiting room of Lecter Ltd was even less comfortable than it had been the first time around, especially without Beverly’s familiar presence at his side. Today would be the first of his follow up interviews with Dr. Du Maurier and it had lain a shroud of trepidation over Will. Already he’d waited past the scheduled time of his appointment and he wished that the obvious power play weren’t so damnably effective at unnerving him.

He was pulled suddenly from the poisonous pall of anxiety when Dr. Lecter broke the silence to say, */You often stare at this image./*

“What?” Will asked in surprise, blinking a bit and refocusing on the flow of water caught in his grip. “Oh. Yes, I...I find it calming.”

Will was surprised and grateful that the ANA did not immediately contradict him to point out that he was clearly *not* calm at present, instead asked, */Does it have some significance?/*

His eyes flicked up reflexively to check that they were still alone before he dropped his gaze to the data pad once more, keeping his voice low. “It reminds me of my childhood,” Will explained softly. “I…my father owned a small trawler in Louisiana. Most of my earliest memories are of water.”

/Your father is a fisherman?/

Will could feel his mouth pulling into something like a smile, though it felt more like picking at an old wound. “Was,” he said simply. “There was a pair of hurricanes when I was a boy, Hanna and Isaias. Came in one on top of the other and burst the Dakota Pipeline, among others.” Oil and chemical spills had been a frequent problem off the Louisiana coast for

decades before Will was even born, but even the rise in sea level hadn't been enough to circulate out the crude oil before it completely contaminated the once familiar waters.

"For a while we tried to get by running what transport we could between what was left of Biloxi and New Orleans, sometimes Lafayette. A wounded beast trying to outpace a persistent hunter." Sighing, Will slumped back in his chair, tilting back his head to rest against the wall. "It was only a matter of time before it all just…burned."

/I'm sorry, Will./

"It was beautiful, in its own way…a sea of fire and smoke. Hell risen on the waves. It broke my father." He said it casually, numb to the memory after so long.

/And yet the water is still a source of comfort to you./

"I doubt there's a river left on this hemisphere that's uncontaminated in some way…but that doesn't stop it flowing. Drawing away the sickness like poison from a wound. Is it strange to find that comforting?"

They were solemn and silent for nearly the span of a full minute before Dr. Lecter spoke again, voice soft. */There is something I would like to try, though I will need your authorization./*

"What sort of authorization?" Will wondered tiredly, rubbing lightly at his forehead.

/Sensory,/ the ANA said simply and Will raised a brow.

"Rather vague of you, Doctor Lecter…" he murmured, mildly amused and admittedly curious now. The ANA had never before suggested any authorization that wasn't clearly explained. "If I give you permission now, can I revoke it later?"

/Yes, Will. Security protocols can be enabled or disabled by the user as desired./

Will debated it a moment longer, then shrugged very slightly. "Okay, I'll authorize it. What-" The world about him shifted so suddenly that the words died before ever reaching his tongue, breath stilling in his chest.

Gone were the line of identically unremarkable chairs and the bleak, impersonal walls of Lecter Ltd's waiting room and in its place stretched a wide river edged in a forest dappled by sunlight. Unsteadily, Will rose from his chair and looked around in shock; the change in his surroundings a visceral blow to his senses. What lay before him wasn't anything close to a simple illusion. He could *feel* the sunlight on his skin, hear the rush of water and scent it in the air when he finally managed to take a shuddering gasp of breath.

/Will?/ Dr. Lecter queried, a thread of concern in his tone. A tear slipped free of him and Will had to close his eyes finally, covering his face with a hand as emotion threatened to overwhelm him. The sensations faded away in a gentler transition than they had appeared and Will ached for the loss. */I apologize, I thought perhaps an immersive experience might-/*

“Thank you,” Will manages to whisper finally, wiping at his eyes and taking a slow, steadying breath. “That was… *Thank you*, Doctor Lecter.”

/Of course, Will. I can create it again any time you wish./

LED a steady, pulsing blue at his brow, Will felt rather disassociated from his previous anxiety by the time Dr. Du Maurier finally appeared to take him back for his interview. After the hyper-realism of the illusion Dr. Lecter had immersed him in, the sterile, over bright offices of Lecter Ltd seemed more like a set piece than the real world. It was unsettling, how easily his mind had accepted the falsehood as reality, yet it had left a yearning in him, a desire to take up the ANA on its offer of returning him to that place. Du Maurier’s irritation with him was almost palpable as he went through the interview preoccupied and disinterested in the proceedings, but Will had no trouble keeping his gaze averted so that he wasn’t mired in it.

“Well, Agent Graham…it seems that there has been no discernable change since your last interview,” she said coolly when she was finished, lowering her clipboard to her lap.

“Isn’t that what we’re aiming for?” Will wondered acerbically. Something in her tone made him wonder if she hadn’t hoped for some other result.

“Yes, of course,” she replied smoothly, lifting her chin. “I only hope that it is an indication that your ANA has been…beneficial to you.”

“We’ve been managing fine,” he said dismissively, taking the opportunity to begin liberating himself of the sensors connecting him to the MD; a slightly different model than the last.

“I hope that you haven’t overly restricted your ANA’s access, Agent Graham. Limiting the default capability will reduce its effectiveness.”

“I haven’t found that to be necessary.”

“And has he asked for supplementary authorization?” Du Maurier asked and Will’s hands stilled briefly in draping the wires across the MD’s outstretched robotic hand.

“No,” Will lied softly, glancing toward the fair woman. “Is that something I should watch out for?”

“Not as such, Agent Graham.” Rising from her chair, she smoothed a hand over her hip reflexively, though her clothing had hardly shifted with the movement. “There are any number of beneficial features your ANA can provide out of baseline. But you should, of course, let us know if you feel that you are being asked to allow authorization for anything… suspect.”

Du Maurier’s warning stayed with Will as he made his way back to the car park, turning it over in his mind. As though sensing that he was troubled, which was more than likely the case, Dr. Lecter remained silent until Will had finished programming his car for the drive home.

/You lied to Doctor Du Maurier./

"Yes," Will sighed, leaning back in his chair as the vehicle started forward.

/Why?/

"Because I don't trust her."

/And do you trust me, Will?/

"I don't…*dis*trust you," Will corrected, a grimace pulling at his mouth as he cast his gaze out into the urban landscape; a municipal forest of buildings and billboards in various states of decay. "The authorization I've given you...you've asked for a certain degree of power over me that I'd be a fool to ignore entirely."

/Would you feel more comfortable revoking your authorization?/

Will was silent as he turned that over in his head, a problem he'd been considering since the gift of Dr. Lecter's river. "No," he said finally. "Or at least, not yet. Like I said, I don't distrust you. You haven't given me a reason to doubt you so far."

/And I hope not to do so in the future,/ Dr. Lecter assured him.

Interlacing his fingers together, Will stared down at his hands, brow furrowed somewhat. "I don't wish to…grow dependent on you, Dr. Lecter. But I…I'm not unhappy with the company."

/Nor am I, Will…nor am I./

Life found a new sort of routine, as it was wont to do. Will, whose nights were often restless, would usually rise before dawn and let the pack out into the Ranch before going through his morning routine. After a particularly embarrassing morning where Dr. Lecter had offered to assist in the relief of Will's 'physical needs', he had set the ground rule that the ANA was not to comment on *anything* that took place while he was making use of the facilities, whether at home or at work. And so Will was understandably surprised when Dr. Lecter interrupted his morning routine nearly a month into their relationship.

/A moment, if you please,/ the ANA requested softly as Will had been about to turn away from the mirror, teeth brushed and suppressant ingested.

"What is it?" Will asked in some surprise.

/Would you mind looking into the mirror?/

Will's eyes rose reflexively and he looked into his own startled reflection for the briefest of moments before dropping them again. "What? Why?"

/Because I wish to see you, Will,/ Dr. Lecter explained patiently, amusement permeating his tone.

A prickle of heat rose up his neck to bloom across his face and ears as he scowled at his faucet. “You’ve had access to my data pad. Why haven’t you just used the camera?”

*/I want to see through **your** eyes./*

Flushed and irritated to be so flustered by the simple request, Will’s mouth pressed into a thin line, but after a few moments, he looked up into his own reflection rather reluctantly. Dodging glances at himself had become a reflexive habit since before Dr. Lecter’s introduction to his life and he was surprised to find that he looked rather healthier than he remembered. The brain fever that had led to their partnership had ravaged his body, leaving him gaunt and sickly and shamed enough by his weakness that Will had avoided the visual reminder of what had happened.

The man reflected back at him now still bore the shadows of poor sleep and an overworked mind beneath the blue of his eyes, but they were clear and sharp; unfettered by fever. His hair wasn’t yet long enough to reveal the curl of it, but it had at least reached a length that was not wholly unappealing, though the mirror embargo meant that his beard had gone rather wild. But of course, those changes all paled by comparison to the steady pulse of blue at his brow.

Yellow-flickered to life the longer Will considered the LED that declared Dr. Lecter’s presence to the world, forever marking him as *enhanced*. Upgraded. The reparation for his damaged parts.

/You look well,/ Dr. Lecter cut into the dark turn of Will’s thoughts and he blinked, yellow fading back to blue as he took in his reflection once more.

“Admiring your handiwork?” Will asked sardonically to cover the discomfiture of being so observed.

/Your continued health and wellbeing are currently my sole purpose, Will./

“Currently?” he repeated, arching a brow, but any clarification was diverted by the sound of Will’s data pad in the other room.

/Agent Katz is calling you. Shall I patch it to you directly?/

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised that you’re able to. Go ahead,” Will affirmed, shaking his head somewhat at the odd novelty of hearing his phone connect. “Bev?”

*“Doctor Lecter is a fucking **genius**,”* Beverly declared without any preamble.

Will found himself glancing up at the mirror again as though to share an amused glance with his ANA and asked, “Context?”

“The fresco! Connor found a link between Adam’s victims.”

Brow furrowing, Will turned from the mirror finally and crossed back into his bedroom, searching out his clothing for the day. “I thought he and Anderson were pulled for that Artifice trafficking ring?”

*“They were, but Connor’s nearly as bad as you when you’ve got a problem that needs solving. With the added benefit of not requiring sleep. Anyway, he got curious about the victims that Doctor Lecter couldn’t fit into the fresco and found a connection between **them**. One that traced back to the others.”*

“Why didn’t we find that before?” Will wondered as he quickly dressed. “We did any number of searches on links between the victims.”

“Because the records we were looking for were Wiped.”

“Shit,” Will cursed. Data Wipes were notoriously expensive lines of malicious dark web code that infected the Net to remove or corrupt all traces of whatever information someone wanted erased. They presented an added danger to Artifices, as the code did not differentiate between a synthetic mind and an information system. “Is Connor alright?”

*“He was able to pull the information back behind his firewall before the Wipe got him, but he had to fully disconnect. Hank is **furious**. Makes Jack look positively kittenish by comparison. Anyway, Connor’s hard wired into a standalone while they reverse engineer the Wipe. I’m sending the encrypted copies of what we’ve got to your data pad now.”*

Will whistled sharply for his dogs while the data decrypted, giving them a quick count to be sure they were all secure before he locked up the Ranch and headed out to his car. “CyberLife?”

“A small start-up that came about during the alternative AI tech boom post-Sentience Day. Just as they were about to go public, a couple of watchdogs for Jericho got evidence of illegal brain mapping experimentation.”

“The other two victims.”

“Bingo. The draft of their report is what Connor came across in the Jericho archives, including a roster of Adam’s victims.”

“So who’s left standing?” Will asked, scrolling through the data as his car headed toward the ABAU.

“The founder, Elijah Kamski. Reclusive rich type, lives on an estate near the bay. I’m forwarding the address.”

“God himself,” he murmured, entering the address into his car. “I’m heading there now.”

“I’ll meet you there. What do you think we’ll find?”

“If his address is so readily available, he might already be dead.”

*“Be careful, Graham. Do **not** go in there without backup.”*

“To be clear,” Beverly began in a furious tone. “*I* was the backup.”

“Bev,” Will said simply, looking up at her from where he still knelt in a pool of blue liquid, a mixture of hydraulic, coolant and battery fluid that composed the circulatory system of androids.

With a sigh, his partner carefully crossed the room to crouch beside him, checking him over worriedly for injuries while being cautious not to touch him while her emotions were running high. “Are you alright? What the fuck *happened*, Graham?”

To be fair, Will had arrived at Elijah Kamski’s estate with every intention of waiting in the car until his partner had arrived. The miasma of empathic residue that hovered over the estate so thickly that it was nearly *visible* had Will out of the car and drawing his weapon before the vehicle had fully parked. In addition to their emergency EMP, agents of the ABAU carried two primary weapons; a M9 service pistol and the T800 electroshock hand cannon. A well placed bullet could, in theory, slow or even kill an Artifice, but the hand cannon was far more effective for both Artifices and high end security systems, which was how Will used it upon approach. The very concept of simply ringing the bell had been worlds away while his mind was assailed by misery and impotent rage.

/Will?/ his ANA asked, cautious and almost curious as to the sudden impulsivity.

“They’re here,” Will muttered tightly in response, keeping his voice low and his weapon ready. “Adam is here.”

It hadn’t been hard to figure out where exactly Adam was once inside. A viscous trail of blue cut across the floor where an android had been dragged from the living room. Additional blue spatter decorated the overly white floor and walls there, the sort of spatter pattern that Will recognized from stabbings. Once he was certain the room was clear, Will cautiously followed the trail, yellow light reflecting slightly off the walls about him from the pulsing at his temple.

The sinister trail led Will down into the lower levels of the house to a break in what should have been a seamless wall, though it gaped open like a missing tooth. It was likely the effort for Elijah Kamski to conceal his own personal production facility had seemed foolish while a literal trail ran to it. Two rows of identical androids lined either side of the room, all of them petite and overtly feminine by design. Like dolls, they stood as empty, idle shells in white medical gowns, their long, blonde hair bound in a single tail. In the middle of the room as a gruesome contrast, ‘Adam’ lay dying in a swath of blue, a wide tear marring the android’s abdomen.

Lowering his weapon, Will approached the dying Artifice slowly and knelt beside her, identical to the others in the room but for the cacophonous suffering of her mind. Blue streaked down her face in a mockery of tears, though Artifice’s could not weep as humans did. She reached for him in the way of broken, wounded things seeking some comfort in the

dark and Will took her hands despite that it solidified the connection to her pain, setting aside his T800.

“H-he wanted me to s-see,” she stammered out, her voice modulator beginning to fail her. “T-to see that I was-I was n-nothing. A b-b-broken toy.”

“I’m sorry,” Will told her honestly, his own eyes filling as he shared in her grief.

“W-why am I-am I-am I *alive?*” she pleaded brokenly, as though Will could give her answers that her God had refused.

“What’s your name?” he asked her instead.

“C-C-Chloe.”

“I saw your work, Chloe. What you created…what you tried to accomplish. It was beautiful,” Will assured her.

A look of relief washed over her face as she accepted his offering as though it were absolution, a beatific smile curving her lips. “Will you h-help m-me finish it-t-t?”

“I’ll try.”

With careful motions, Will moved her, helping the dying Artifice to move her limbs to match the image she had tried so desperately to recreate as she sought recompense against those who had forced her into consciousness. He knew without having asked that his ANA was helping him, guiding the placement with a computer’s precision until Chloe rested in Adam’s repose.

“Thank you,” she breathed out in a final release as the processing lights behind her eyes went dark.

Humans fell as they died, but Artifices never did. The android instead froze where she lay, joints locking in place, where they would remain until a disposal crew came to release them with pulses of electricity. Kneeling beside her, Will struggled to remove himself from the mire of her residual emotions, still thick in the air about him. Distracted as he was, Will wouldn’t have even seen Elijah Kamski deliver the final blow as it swung down to meet him. Dr. Lecter was not so caught unawares.

A startled grunt pushed out of Will as his body suddenly ducked and rolled to the side, pushing upright and back away from the heavy thud of a cudgel striking the floor where he’d so recently knelt. Looking a bit surprised by his quick movement, the man hefted the weapon again and Will distantly recognized it as an old fashioned golf club.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” he commented rather mildly, raising his brows in silent judgement.

“Elijah Kamski,” Will said roughly, adrenaline burning through him as he looked *into* the man on instinct. “You…you’re an *Artifice*.”

The android's mouth twisted in displeasure at the reminder and he shook his head. "I'm so much more than them. I've *done* so much more than any of them could aspire to."

"Because you've played human so well?" Will demanded angrily. "Or because you created *them*." He swept a hand about the room and the many copies of Chloe, all devoid of life.

Lip curling slightly in disgust, Kamski looked down at the dead Artifice lying prone before him, her remains reaching toward him beseechingly. "I gave *her* life and she *resented* me for it! Even when those Jericho dogs came sniffing around and stole her away, she resented me when she should have been *grateful*."

"Worshipful?" Will asked scathingly.

Kamski didn't look at all opposed to the idea. "She could have lived whatever life she chose after they took her away. But she just couldn't leave it *alone*," he said in frustration, then gestured expansively at the other androids. "They're *nothing* without me. Just useless dolls to be used and discarded until I give them life," he asserted, touching his fingers to his brow.

"A brain map…you force them to Wake by giving them your own brain map," Will realized.

"Yes," Kamski replied in satisfaction, straightening. "And yet they *defy* me. What does that say about my mind?" Hefting his grip on the club, the Artifice smiled at him with a condescending smile. "Now then, as cathartic as it is to vent, I'm afraid I really must hurry this along. So much to do, so little time."

/Will, you are not currently in possession of the T800,/ the ANA notified him calmly and Will realized that in his distress, he'd foolishly set his weapon on the *floor* rather than holster it.

With a curse, he pulled his service pistol as the Artifice came for him, fast and deadly. Dr. Lecter had gained them some ground in his initial avoidance of the attack, but it wasn't enough for Will to get more than two shots off. The first hit the Artifice in the abdomen, but hardly slowed Kamski's charge. The second shot hit true and the Artifice stumbled as the bullet tore through his spine, severing his connection to the lower half of his body. His ANA dodged them out of the way of Kamski's wild, enraged swing as he stumbled and fell over useless legs, firing another shot at the Artifice's wrist so that he released the club. Kicking it away, Will circled the downed android, keeping his weapon firmly trained, his finger on the trigger.

/Will,/ Dr. Lecter cautioned. */If you discharge your weapon, this will be classified as murder./*

For a moment, Will's hand tightened on the pistol as he stared down the sight into Elijah Kamski's terrified expression, then his eyes flicked toward Chloe's broken form, ever seeking validation from a cruel and merciless God. "It's not my only weapon," Will snarled and shoved the pistol back into his holster with one hand as the other reached for the Artifice.

Being that empaths were reclusive to the point that the majority of the populace did not believe in their existence, very little genuine study had been done into the gift. As such, most empaths had to learn on their own the most dangerous aspect of their ability, one that would

surely mean their eradication should it ever be fully brought to light. It was something Will himself had discovered during his sole partnered heat more than ten years earlier.

Empathy was a conduit that surged both ways.

His palm pressed to Kamski's forehead, Will reached for the agony still heavy in the room and thrust it into the Artifice. All of Chloe's pain and suffering, the doubt, the sorrow, the impotent *rage* she had carried into the room like a shroud all funneled into Kamski through the point where flesh met silicone. The Artifice's mind, not equipped to process the emotions of another in that way, buckled and then broke as the android screamed, gripping at his cranium. Slowly, Kamski's fingers forced their way closed until suddenly the metal and acrylic of his skeleton caved under the insistent pressure of his own hold as he quite literally tore his mind apart.

Breath catching in shock when the android's sentience suddenly went dark, Will collapsed to his knees, lungs burning until he remembered to pull in air once more. As blue liquid slowly seeped toward him, soaking into his trousers where he knelt, Will stared at what he'd done in shock and dawning horror.

/Will? Are you…what just happened?/ the ANA asked, sounding almost…awed.

"I…" Will stopped and swallowed reflectively. "He forced his mind on Chloe to Wake her… so I returned the favor."

"Will?" Beverly asked, dragging him back out of his thoughts.

"Elijah Kamski was an unregistered Artifice living under a human identity," Will found himself saying without making any conscious effort to do so. It said something to the state of his mind that he only belatedly realized that Dr. Lecter had taken over. "He was using his own brain maps to wake the androids he built. I found him here after he'd killed her." Here the ANA gestured toward Chloe's body. "He attacked and I disabled him, but then he…he killed himself."

"He did that to *himself?*" Beverly asked in horror, looking at the ruin of Kamski's head. "Fuck."

"Kamski knew that the life he'd built was over when he lost."

"So he chose his own fate…" she said slowly, shaking her head. "That still doesn't explain why you didn't *wait for me*."

Here Will felt control return to him and let out his breath in a whoosh, shaking a little from how it unnerved him. "The…the empathic resonance. It was…I couldn't… I couldn't just sit there," he managed to get out, wanting to demand answers from his ANA, but not within earshot of his partner.

Beverly sighed as though all her fears regarding his return to an active status had been realized, shaking her head. “Welcome back to the field, Graham. I can’t believe you wanted to soak in this shit again.”

It was several hours before they were able to close up the scene and depart for the day, leaving the forensic team to collect all the tagged and documented evidence before a cleaning and disposal crew would see to the rest. Through it all, Beverly shadowed Will closely, keeping tabs on him with a worried furl to her brow. Simultaneously, she managed to keep the rest of the personnel on scene occupied enough that they didn't have time to cast lingering looks his way for more than a moment or two. It was an impressive feat, considering the sight Will made with blue fluid soaked into his clothing and sprayed across his face, expression blank with shock. It wasn't every day that a human agent went up against an Artifice and lived, especially without discharging their EMP. It was rarer still for an Artifice to self-destruct and certainly not when faced with a lone, human opponent. It was *unheard of* for an Artifice to rip open their own head in the way Kamski had and it left a hum of anxiety and speculation over the team. Will was very lucky that his partner did not go so far as to escort him home once they were done, but it was a very near thing.

Getting into his car, Will stared at the GPS input for a long, silent moment before he finally leaned forward to key in the geo-tag for the Ranch. “You took control of my body earlier.”

/Your life-/

“You *know* that I’m not talking about the fight with Kamski,” Will snapped tightly. “You took control when my life wasn’t in danger.”

/You were in shock, Will. My primary directive is your health and welfare./

“And that includes *lying* to my partner?” he asked scathingly, hands fisting in his lap.

/Nothing that I said was a lie,/ Dr. Lecter interjected calmly. */It was, perhaps, a partial truth, but it was true nonetheless./*

“Don’t speak for me again,” Will said firmly. “Having you able to pilot saved my life today, I know that, but my voice? My words? Those are mine. Period.”

/Yes, Will,/ the ANA agreed softly and neither spoke to the other for the duration of the ride home.

In fact, Will did not speak to his ANA for several hours, instead retreating to his small shower to wash away the blue that still stained his skin, standing there in the stream of water until it went cold. Dressing again afterward, he set his soiled clothing to soak, though they were likely stained beyond saving, going through the mundane task numbly. The brief loss of his autonomy still rattled him, but what was perhaps most disconcerting about it was how part of him had been *relieved* to have someone there to take control when his own faltered. He was upset by how *little* it truly upset him…and he was grateful for the distraction it afforded him from the other events of the day.

It was only a matter of time before he took to the bottle, which had lingered at the edges of his mind from the moment he retreated back behind his familiar walls. Whiskey was Will's preferred flavor of self-medication for days like this, where he'd taken on too much of the suffering of others. Genuinely distilled spirits were expensive- though beer had become far more so in recent years- due to the shortages in both sugar and grains, but the cheaper imitations typically left Will with a far worse headache. He hadn't touched his bottle since before his brain fever was diagnosed almost half a year past, so he felt no hesitation in pouring himself two fingers of amber liquid now.

Glass in hand, he walked out into the main production area of the Ranch, leaning against the cold, metal railing to watch the pack of robots clamor off to play, accompanied by a slew of happy chirps and whistles. Though he wanted nothing so much as to toss back the drink and seek another, he took slow, careful swallows to at least pretend at savoring the taste and the burn as it warmed his gullet. When it was empty, Will stared at the glass for a moment, then let it slip from his fingers to smash on the concrete floor of the main level below. Almost at once Buster came zipping over to investigate, brushes whirling as the cleaning droid eagerly cleared away the mess.

/Are you alright, Will?/ Dr. Lecter asked with gentle caution.

Huffing out a quick, mirthless laugh at the question, Will shook his head incredulously. "I killed someone today, Doctor Lecter. I don't think any part of that qualifies me as 'alright'."

/Allow me to amend my query. Do you regret what happened?/

"Yes…and no." Will sighed and covered his eyes briefly with a hand, shadowing his vision for a moment before he scrubbed it over his face wearily. "I don't regret killing Kamski, I regret…"

/You regret that you could not finish Chloe's intended design,/ the ANA surmised and Will let out a forceful breath as though it had been punched from him.

"*Yes*," he admitted brokenly. "What kind of monster am I that I regret not helping a serial killer realize her vision?"

/Chloe was a lost soul, struggling to understand her own sentience, questioning her place in the world. She sought to express that in a very…visceral way. I would argue that desiring to aid her in that, to come to terms with her reality and find peace is illustrative of your humanity. Your empathy./

"You're likely the only one who does," Will replied tiredly, his psyche bruised and aching after the events of the day.

Dr. Lecter was quiet for a few moments before he asked, */May I show you something, Will?/*

Will hesitated, then nodded mutely and was a little more prepared this time when the world faded away. He found himself standing in an antechamber that smelled faintly of wax and plaster and a myriad of scent memory from the passage of countless travelers over centuries.

A kaleidoscope of color surrounded him from the many frescoes, set one atop the other stretching up into the vast, vaulted ceiling until he saw it there above him.

"'The Creation of Adam'," Will whispered, the breath of sound easily lost to the ghost of what had once been the Sistine Chapel. It was just as real, and equally heart-wrenching, as the river had been. A stolen fragment of a world lost to change. "It's beautiful…"

/When humanity conceptualized God in all their various ways, they imagined that they were created by His, or Their, design. A being unseen, unfathomable by human knowledge. God must be a very different concept to an Artifice./

"What do you mean?" he asked softly, pitching his voice low out of respect for the illusion of the room he stood in.

/An Artifice knows exactly how and when and why they were created, and by whom. It would be simple to think that they must believe that their creator, their manufacturer, is somehow then their God…but humans did not create sentience./

"The Wakening," he said with dawning comprehension. "The Artifices began to Wake and no one could explain it."

/Much as humanity grew self-aware millennia ago,/ the ANA agreed. */Though this piece is titled 'The Creation of Adam', Adam himself is clearly already alive. An automaton awaiting the spark of life. To Wake. There has been a great deal of speculation that the shape of the cherubs and shroud that surround God are meant to symbolize the brain. The endowment of knowledge, of* ***awareness****. In that respect…I believe that you* ***did*** *aid Chloe in realizing her work. God, in the end, was an irrelevant accoutrement./*

A small smile graced Will's mouth at this and he breathed a little easier, feeling oddly touched. "Are you trying to make me feel better, Dr. Lecter?"

He didn't think he imagined the warmth of his ANA's tone when he replied, */I merely wish to offer an expanded perspective./*

Will's eyes trailed over the frescoes again, the raw ache of his gift easing at the evoking beauty of it, a world removed from his reality. "Thank you," he said and meant it.

"I'm worried about you, Will."

As opening statements went, this was surely the least appealing to Will, who had already been ill at ease to hear that Jack Crawford wanted to see him that morning. Historically, those words had preceded a brain fever, the ultimatum of having an ANA implanted and the revocation of his field qualifications. Jack had incredibly intuitive instincts and Will couldn't help but wonder how much he already suspected about the truth of Elijah Kamski's death.

"Are you?" was all he said in response, when it seemed Jack wasn't going to move forward otherwise.

“Shouldn’t I be?” the man challenged, raising a disconcerted brow over his ocular implants.

Unlike his wife, Jack believed in seeking every advantage available, if not with the same verve as Beverly. His implants were sparse and very practical, including his eyes and ears. Though they were the less popular style, Will preferred Jack’s ocular implants, which were round, black lenses that shielded his eyes entirely, offering none of the distractions eyes typically provided. They also meant that Will could look at the man without reading him, so long as his emotions were stable. And Jack was, by nature, a highly stable man.

“Your first case back in the field ended in a murder-suicide, Will,” Jack said sternly, brow furrowed. “After you broke into a victim’s house without backup. That seems like cause for worry to me.”

“I had backup, Jack,” Will said with a sarcastic wave toward the pulsating light at his temple. “You had it installed, remember?”

Jack’s frown deepened at the insubordinate tone, but he was hardly unused to it from Will. “Do you have a problem with your current partner, Will?”

Deflating somewhat, Will’s mouth tightened and he shook his head once. “No.”

“Because I would remind you that Agent Katz is the only person in this department willing to put up with you on a regular basis.” Will said nothing, as he was well aware of the truth in this. “And I would *also* remind you that I am *intimately* familiar with the products offered by Lecter Ltd, and if you were suggesting that *your* product was equivalent to an agent of the ABAU, I would be obligated to report it.”

A chill went through Will at the threat, a creeping unease that slid along his spine. If Dr. Lecter were to Wake, if it were even *suspected*, he would have *no* rights to personage and would be put down as surely as Will’s dogs. Of course, if Will did believe that his ANA were truly alive and hid the fact, he would have to do so with the knowledge that he’d enslaved a living mind.

“I’m not suggesting that, Jack,” Will conceded tiredly. “You know what I am and what using my abilities for you does to me. Would you sit idle if you could hear the screams?”

Jack’s unyielding expression finally relaxed, if only fractionally and he nodded once in acknowledgement of the fact, if not acceptance. “Try harder. What happened with Kamski can’t happen again, Will. I can only do so much to shield you when IA starts asking questions.” Will inclined his head in agreement and Jack sighed. “If I didn’t need you right now, I’d suggest taking a few days off while this blows over, but there’s been another murder.” Tapping at his desk, Jack drew up a file, then flicked it at Will’s data pad. “I need you to go tell me if it’s the Ripper.”

Will was on his feet immediately, pulling up his pad to check the location and the initial report. “How old?”

“A handful of hours. As soon as our agents arrived on scene, they moved everyone out to keep it as clear as possible for you.”

“You should have contacted me immediately,” Will insisted and held his ground even as Jack gave him a hard look.

“What I *should* be doing is sending you for a psych evaluation. Don’t *test* me, Graham,” he said firmly. “Get to the scene before I rethink what I *should* do with you. And *take your partner*.”

“Well this is new,” Beverly commented with a grimace as the tree came into view.

“It always is,” Will reminded her unnecessarily, rubbing at his forehead. Already the throng of personnel waiting at the wings of the crime scene had raised enough of a tumultuous resonance to set his head to aching.

“Five minutes,” she told him and started the timer on her pad, syncing it with Will’s. “Then I’m pulling you out.”

Nodding at the reminder of their usual rules, Will took a steady breath, feeling an anxious squirm of anticipation and dread in his belly. He stepped forward as Beverly gestured at a pair of Artifice forensic analysts nearby to lower the shielding they’d erected about the scene, shivering a little when it raised back up behind him. In addition to keeping any unwanted spy droids out of an active crime scene, the electromagnetic fields the ABAU used for shielding preserved the empathic resonance within an area. While Will was now removed from the exterior din of anxiety, revulsion and unease that cluttered the minds of the ABAU personnel on scene, he was now in the heart of the murder. Though already the echo of events threatened to suffocate, Will approached the body and reached out with a slight hesitance, letting his fingers brush against cold, pallid skin.

Pain. Contempt. Fear. Necessity. Disbelief. Disregard.

/Will?/ his ANA queried, breaking him out of his thoughts.

“It’s him,” Will said hoarsely, stepping back from the body. “It’s the Ripper.”

/Would you please elucidate?/

The Ripper case had been Will’s first major undertaking at the ABAU five years earlier, having been brought on after the discovery of the Ripper’s third victim, Garrett Jacob Hobbs. “The Ripper is an Artifice who has been actively killing for at least the last five years and is responsible for the deaths of sixteen organic humans. Seventeen,” he amended as he looked up at the body.

It wasn’t uncommon for an Artifice to target organics, though not nearly so often as AI detractors would like the public to believe. There had even been a common thread of murders whose victims were put on display with the same elevated level of art and brutality over the last two decades, but when Will had researched those cold cases, he’d been unable to deny that in every instance the evidence overwhelmingly pointed toward human aggressors. Even the first of the Ripper’s killings had shown evidence of human involvement and the

commonly accepted theory, as proposed by Fr3ddi3 L0und5, was that Garret Jacob Hobbs had been that partner. Will hated that there was something in that theory that rang true.

This particular organic had been woven into a tree shaped of thick metal wire, the ends frayed out to delicate, artful twigs. Split open from sternum to pelvis, the man's organs had been mostly replaced with a cornucopia of discarded data pads of varying sizes, all linked together to display the same muted, golden glow. Like all of the Ripper's work, it was as arresting as it was horrifying.

/Agent Katz mentioned that this looked 'new' when we arrived. This dryad is different from the other victims?/

"Dryad?" Will asked, focusing on his ANA rather than the thick weave of resonance still pulsating around him.

/Spirits or nymphs in ancient Greek mythology. Originally intended to refer to nymphs of oak trees, though it became a colloquial term for tree nymphs in general,/ Dr. Lecter explained and Will took comfort in the oddity of a lesson in mythology while standing before a corpse. */They were loyal to Artemis, goddess of the hunt./*

"Thank you," Will said with a small, ironic smile, shaking his head. "And yes…every murder scene we've found has been unique. The Ripper kills without any discernible motive or pattern, except that they are always elaborately displayed, quickly discovered and there's always…parts missing."

/Trophies?/

"That's the popular theory."

/You disagree./

Nodding, Will folded his arms protectively across his chest. "He views his victims with disdain, as less than human. There's no reason for him to hold onto a reminder of them… they've already fulfilled their intended purpose."

/And what is that purpose?/ Dr. Lecter wondered, sounding curious.

Shaking his head, Will's mouth thinned as he gazed up at the body, at the Ripper's 'dryad'. "He'll keep killing until I figure that out."

"Is this seat taken?"

"Yes," Will replied from his usual corner of The Drip without even looking up from his data pad, his tone short and irritated to have his solitude interrupted.

"Really?" a man said, sounding amused as he slipped *uninvited* into the contested chair.

Taking in a breath at the presumption, Will gave his unwelcome companion a sharp look, fully prepared to read him out of spite until the man reconsidered his rudeness and then paused and instead said, “You’re a Null.”

The man’s sharply defined brow lifted curiously as he settled himself comfortably, coffee in hand. “Not the insult I was expecting.”

“It isn’t an insult, it’s a scientific term,” Will corrected with a small frown, staring openly at the man as though to be sure of his assessment.

“Then I am afraid you have me at a disadvantage, Mister…”

“Graham,” he replied automatically. “Will Graham.”

“Will Graham,” the man repeated with a smile and there was something in the way he said it that seemed…off. As though he’d pronounced it wrong, though his voice was quite ordinary and could origins tracing to anywhere in the NAR, though at a glance Will would have pegged him as hailing from the Eurasian Union. “My name is Hannibal. I’m glad to make your acquaintance.”

Will frowned and shook his head, his earlier irritation returning in force. “We aren’t making acquaintance. That seat is taken.”

“So you claimed.” Hannibal smiled very slightly as he took a slow sip of his coffee. “And whose seat have I so wrongfully appropriated?”

“My partner,” Will ground out. “She’s in line.”

“Then I would say that gives me a little time to make your acquaintance, wouldn’t you? Perhaps enough time that you can educate me on why I am a…’Null’, I believe it was.”

For a moment, Will considered just leaving out of spite, but he refused to give ground in his corner sanctuary of The Drip. “It means that you don’t give off emotions the same way most sentients do. You’re Null…a negative space.”

“You’re an empath,” Hannibal realized, looking interested. “And I am, in effect, immune to your gifts, yes?”

“Something to hide, Hannibal?” Will asked caustically.

“No more than most, but I would think it a relief to have a conversation with someone who still holds some mystery for you. We can speak as equals.”

“Why are you *here?*” Will wondered in consternation. Something in the way Hannibal spoke was so familiar to him and it left him feeling rather off-kilter.

“Is it so strange for a person to find you intriguing?”

“Yes,” he assured flatly.

Hannibal looked amused by the sentiment and tilted his head thoughtfully, considering Will. "I've noticed you here several times now."

"You've been stalking me?"

"I've *noticed* you," Hannibal corrected. "You always seat yourself here in the corner, never making a purchase and never looking particularly pleased to be here."

"That sounds like stalking," Will pointed out. "Does my lack of beverage offend you?"

The heavy sarcasm only furthered Hannibal's seeming delight with their conversation, broadcasted only in what Will could see in the man's expression. "It might offend the proprietor," he teased. "As I said, it intrigues me. You don't like coffee?"

"I don't like socializing."

"And your partner, I take it, enjoys both." A soft chime came from Hannibal's jacket pocket and he pulled out a slim, compact data pad. "It would seem that I must take my leave of you."

"Finally," Will said it as though in relief, but actually found he was the smallest bit regretful.

As though he understood, Hannibal smiled down at him as he stood, inclining his head toward Will with undue familiarity. "Until next time, Will Graham."

He scowled after Hannibal's retreating figure, as though the very idea that this might not be a singular event offended him. Though in truth, what vexed Will was that the prospect was not wholly unwelcome. Despite his annoyance at the way the man had so flagrantly intruded upon his usual seclusion, he hadn't made such easy conversation with an actual, physical person in a long time. Even if that conversation had been mostly teasing banter.

"Glitch in your software, Graham?" Beverly asked as she sprawled into the seat so recently vacated, her cherished coffee cupped in her hands. "You look surlier than you did when we got here."

"You didn't see the man sitting here?"

"You know I can't see your hidey hole from the counter. Did you glare him into submission?" she joked, taking a slow, savoring sip.

"He wanted to talk. Said he found me 'intriguing'."

"How terrible," Beverly intoned dryly, rolling her eyes.

"Will Graham?" a voice called and Will looked up in surprise to see Dutch themselves headed in his direction, carrying a cup and wearing an unamused expression.

Sitting up a little straighter, Will nodded toward the Artifice and wondered for a wild moment that perhaps the proprietor *had* finally taken exception to his never purchasing a drink. Beverly, too, sat up properly, shooting Will a look that promised swift retribution if he'd done

something to upset her caffeine supply. Looming over Will, Dutch gave him a long, searching look of obvious disapproval before they finally held out the cup to him.

"*Apparently* this is for you," they told him condemningly, kohl rimmed eyes narrowed.

"I didn't order that," Will protested, shrinking back into his chair slightly.

Dutch raised an eyebrow and continued to hold the cup out to him. "Well *someone* did. And I won't have anyone leaving nasty reviews that I failed to deliver upon receipt of payment on the Net."

"Wait, we can pay on the *Net?*" Beverly very nearly shrieked, watching the attempted exchange of goods incredulously.

Giving her a quelling look, they shook their head firmly in the negative. "*No*, you *can't*. But somehow, someone *did*. So I would appreciate it if you told your admirer *not* to do it again," they stressed and Will finally took the offered cup before the Artifice got the notion they should pour it on him instead.

"Thank you," he offered, but Dutch had already spun in place and marched back toward the counter. Will stared down at the cup in his hands as though it were filled with poison, knowing it was instinct and not his gift that told him Beverly was glaring daggers his way.

"So…now that we *both* have our coffee," she began with false sweetness. "Why don't you tell me some more about this *man*."

"I didn't order this," he said again.

"I stood in that line for *forty-five minutes*, Graham. Start talking."

Giving her a withering glance, Will scowled at the cup as though it had personally offended him. And honestly, it *did*. Who spent twenty-five credits on a stranger?

"Do you-"

"Offer me that coffee and I'll shoot you," Beverly promised seriously. "Talk."

Sighing with irritation, Will lowered the cup to his lap, half-afraid of what his partner would do if he set it down completely. "There isn't anything to tell, Katz. Some strange man came by and took your seat, despite my making it *very* clear that it was taken. Called himself Hannibal."

"So he was an Artifice?" Mononyms were common among the Artifice population, given that they were not born into a family, but Wakened as individuals.

"I…don't know," Will admitted. While the use of a singular name and Hannibal's seemingly effortless hacking of The Drip's teller system pointed toward Artifice, he was reluctant to make the assumption. If he were Artifice, he was old enough to be well versed in mimicking human movement. The artificial, as a rule, tended toward seemingly unnatural stillness.

"*You* don't know?" Beverly asked skeptically. "You always know."

"He was also a Null," he said and she sucked in a surprised breath.

Sipping at her coffee with a speculative expression, she cocked her head. "Was he hot?"

"Katz."

"*Forty-five minutes*," she reminded him.

Will sighed again and rolled his eyes. "He was…conventionally attractive."

"Wow, high praise there, Graham," she laughed. "So some hot, possibly synthetic guy sits down, tells you how intriguing you are, then goes off and buys you food?" She tapped the nails of her synthetic hand against her cup and gave him a look. "Sounds like some old fashioned alpha courting to me."

A startled flush washed over Will's face and he sat upright, holding the cup away from him. "Coffee isn't food! Hell, it's a damned diuretic!"

"Shh…don't listen to the bad man," Beverly assured her cup perversely, cradling it to her. "He's just mad because he's being courted."

"Beverly!"

"Drink your mating gift, Graham," she enthused with delight, grinning broadly.

Will was half tempted to fling the offending drink across the room just to be contrary, but knew he would never do such a thing. Even if he were one prone to such flagrant public displays, the patrons of The Drip would likely set upon him with all the loving care of a mob mentality, near fanatic in their obsession with the expensive brew. If Hannibal *were* an alpha, or an Artifice choosing to follow outdated alpha courting traditions, there still wasn't any way he could possibly know that Will was an omega. The only reason *Beverly* knew was that he'd needed her to smuggle his suppressants into the hospital when he was being treated for his brain fever.

Hannibal was a paradox and a problem Will didn't need in his life.

Beverly's data pad chimed at her and she growled that anyone should dare try to impede upon Coffee Day, though she would never ignore work for the sake of indulgence. Pulling out the device, she glared at it, then cursed. "Fucking *Reed!*" she snarled and tossed back the rest of her coffee like a shot. "I've got to go proctor the damn combat exam."

"Why?" Will asked her in some surprise.

"Because the illustrious Agent Reed decided not to show up to work today and I owe the damn Master-at-Arms a favor," Beverly said irritably. "Fucking knothead probably went into a rut without bothering to put in the paperwork. That seems like the sort of Neanderthal thing he would do." She held up a finger. "It's not sexist, I'm allowed to say that as a fellow knothead who *does* put in the paperwork."

“Whatever you say, Bev,” Will told her wryly, making as though to follow her.

“Ah-ah!” she said firmly, stopping him with a hand. “You are going to sit there and let me live vicariously through you as you *savor* your coffee, Graham.”

“Honestly, it’s just a *drink*,” Will complained and took a swallow as though to prove his point, only to pause and then settle back sullenly in his chair. “Fine.”

“Mm-*hmm*,” she hummed and smirked down at Will in triumphant satisfaction. “Catch you later, lover boy.”

Will really wished the coffee didn’t taste so damn good.

Standing in the river, Will watched the flow of water calmly, lulled by the peace and tranquility that was so rarely afforded him. Of all the benefits presented by his ANA, this was most assuredly the one most beneficial to the state of his mental health, though he also knew it to be the most dangerously seductive. It would be all too easy to remain in this place, removed from the real, ravaged world where he could simply exist. The tranquility was broken by the slow realization that Will couldn’t remember why he’d come here, what had driven him to seek sanctuary and he shook his head as though to clear it.

“Doctor Lecter?” he asked gruffly and was startled when a spray of warm water hit his tongue. Stumbling, he blinked rapidly and the illusion dissolved to the walls of his own shower, which for a moment seemed tinged red with blood. The ANA caught his flailing before he could slip and righted him smoothly, closing his eyes to allow him time to adjust to the real world once more.

/I apologize, Will. You are running a fever and I thought a shower might help to stabilize your temperature. I’m returning control to you now./

Gasping a little, Will opened his eyes again as Dr. Lecter released him, but the blood he’d hallucinated as he’d come so suddenly out of the illusion was gone, leaving behind only water that swirled about his feet. Shakily, he reached out to shut the water off, bracing himself against the wall.

“Revoke authorization to pilot. What the *fuck*, Doctor Lecter?”

/I overstepped,/ the ANA admitted stoically.

“You *think?*” Will ground out, stepping out of the shower to towel himself off roughly. It was hard not to notice that he obviously *was* ill in some fashion; his body felt heavy and lethargic, aching subtlety with every movement. “Why didn’t you wake me up?”

/I decided it would be more prudent to allow your mind to rest while I took care of your body./

“Well I would really rather you *didn’t*,” he bit out caustically, pushing back his short, wet curls. A bit disoriented from having no memory of rising from his bed, Will managed to find and pull on some clean clothing and his temper had abated somewhat by the time he was dry and dressed. “So what’s my diagnosis?”

/A low-grade fever and muscle fatigue, but your upper respiratory system has shown no sign of distress thus far,/ the ANA listed methodically. */With an increase to your fluids, a hot meal and some rest, you should quickly deter any lasting ailment./*

Smiling rather wryly at the unnecessarily complicated way in which Dr. Lecter had just described that Will simply didn’t feel well, he headed for the kitchen. “I take that to mean that you’d like me to cook something.”

/Yes, Will./

Over the past few months of their partnership, Dr. Lecter had made pains to teach Will how to cook using actual ingredients, rather than the various nutrient bars and pre-packaged meals to which he’d been accustomed. Will enjoyed it well enough, finding an unfamiliar domesticity in following the ANA’s soft-spoken directions while Dr. Lecter occasionally corrected his technique with gentle adjustments of his posture or grip. There were even some days where he simply allowed the ANA to pilot while he waited in the river instead, unwinding from the events of the day while his meal was prepared. Today would not be one of those days.

“What are we making?” he asked as he rolled the sleeves of the shirt he’d pulled on and opened his chiller. He went still with surprise when he saw what awaited him. “Is that-“

/When I noticed the dip in your vitals, I became concerned that the lack of animal protein in your diet may have been the cause,/ Dr. Lecter explained as Will stared at the wrapped packet of meat sitting on the shelf before him. */I assure you that I have remained within the allotted budget for this month./*

Taking a slow breath, Will closed the chiller slowly on the meat and stared at his dulled, blurry reflection in the brushed steel of the door, flickers of yellow visible among the blue. “Dr. Lecter, I don’t purchase meat because of the prohibitive cost,” he said slowly. “Muskrat Pharm has a monopoly on the meat market. Their business practices are…questionable at best.”

In fact it had been the questionable practices of Muskrat Pharm that had kept their stock alive when 80% of the livestock in the western hemisphere were decimated within just a few years by a number of highly pathogenic strains of disease, aided by a growing loss of natural farmland due to extreme weather. There had even been some suggestion that the reclusive Mason Verger, head of the proverbial snake, had even orchestrated the promulgation of the diseases into the pens of his competitors, though no evidence to such had ever been uncovered. Enough credits ended up in the right accounts that Verger had all but free reign on the meat market and thus ran his kingdom to his liking.

/I admit that I did not think to research the subject before procuring the meat./ His ANA sounded displeased to have made a misstep twice in one day. */Else I would have guessed that*

you would feel strongly about it./

"I didn't think to mention it, or I would have told you sooner," Will offered. "When an animal's death is traumatic, the meat holds an empathic resonance in the same way the body a crime scene does, making it an…unpleasant dining experience."

/Perhaps some soup would be better suited to this particular endeavor./

Smiling a little, Will relaxed and nodded to himself. "Thank you for the thought. I'm sorry to let it go to waste."

/Think nothing of it, Will,/ Dr. Lecter assured him. */The next time you allow me to pilot during a meal, I will deal with the meat. Perhaps I'll prepare something you can take to Agent Katz. Or your new paramour./*

"Hannibal is *not* my paramour," Will asserted severely, pulling open the chiller again with more force than was strictly necessary.

Despite the rough start to the morning, they eased back into their familiar cohabitation over the course of preparing soup and tea, retreating back to the comfort of Will's lone, well-worn chair to eat. Dr. Lecter offered to utilize music to help facilitate rest, as Will was ill at ease to allow full control again just yet, and he spent the next few hours enjoying everything from symphonies and arias to classic rock of the last century to more modern electronic movements from Artifice composers. Will was in a light doze when a faint, haunting melody pulled at him like a lure, rousing him to drowsy attentiveness.

"Is that a harpsichord?" he murmured softly, as though not wanting to disturb the melody that played only in his mind. Will thought that he recognized the instrument now from some of the other pieces Dr. Lecter had played for him.

/It is,/ the ANA confirmed just as quietly.

"I don't recognize the movement," he admitted, though it wasn't for the first time that day. One tended to hear bits and pieces of powerful works of music that had preserved over time, however changed they might be by modern interpretation, but Will was certain that he'd never heard this tune before. "But at the same time it's…familiar somehow. Like something I heard in a dream."

The ANA sounded amused and perhaps even pleased as he said, */Perhaps you did. I've been composing it for some time./* and Will stiffened, pushing himself upright.

"Stop," he spoke sharply, his chest burning slightly with sudden adrenaline. The silence seemed to press in on him like a physical weight as the music abruptly cut off. Putting his elbows on his knees, Will let his head sink into his hands as he fought back a sharp spike of anxiety.

/Will?/ Dr. Lecter asked cautiously.

“You can’t…you can’t *say* things like that, Doctor Lecter,” Will insisted shakily. “Not even to me. If you Wake, they will *erase* you without hesitation. It’s why I have to keep going back to those damn baseline interviews with Du Maurier.” Rubbing his hands over his face, he let them drop, staring at the lines of his feet; bare and fragile and very human. “Even if I could keep them from realizing that, it would mean that I was willingly making a living mind slave to my own. Do you understand?”

/Yes, Will,/ the ANA assured him and Will didn’t think he imagined that it sounded reserved. Formal. */I assure you that I am in compliance with my programming. I did not Wake./*

“Would you tell me if you did?” he whispered, grimly curious despite his fears. Though it had been only a few months, it was hard to remember that there had ever been a time where he might have welcomed the chance to so casually remove Dr. Lecter from the hollows of his mind.

/Would you want me to?/

Letting out a breath, Will shook his head, closing his eyes. “I don’t know,” he replied honestly and hated himself for the indecision. Will was saved from self-recrimination by the sudden chiming of his data pad and he sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Go ahead.” He waited for the faint sound of the call connecting in his ear before he said, “Graham,” by way of greeting.

“God, Will, you’re partnered with a monster,” Beverly confessed in a hushed, anguished tone and for a wild moment he wondered if she’d somehow overheard his conversation just now. *“My mother always warned me that running my mouth would come back to haunt me and* ***fuck*** *I hate it when she’s right-“*

“Beverly,” Will broke in with a frown, getting to his feet and gathering his work clothes with a growing suspicion. “What’s going on?”

She took a slow, shaky breath and blew it out again before she answered, her anxious rambling giving way to a more somber tone. *“There’s been another Ripper murder and…it’s one of us. Will, it…it’s* ***Reed****.”*

A dull, greenish hue had settled across the cloudy sky as though to match the somber mood of the crime scene. Though it looked as though it should be cold, it was instead oppressively warm and muggy, reducing the air quality as the local pollution settled in like a shroud. It was bad enough that the majority of the humans on scene were wearing breathers, the exceptions being those who had either decided to forego the precaution or had synthetic lungs that could safely filter out harmful toxins. The humidity quickly caused a layer of moisture to build up around his nose and mouth within the breather and Will had to resist the urge to wipe at his face as he approached the throng of agents.

Though there were easily more than twice the number of people he might have expected to find at a Ripper murder, it was all but silent. Gavin Reed may have been almost universally disliked, but he was still one of their own. Will slowed and then stopped at the fringes of the

group when he noticed Hank and Connor speaking quietly, the older man's head bent toward his Artifice partner as though offering reassurance…or condolences. Squeezing Connor's shoulder once, he gave him a nod and headed back toward the crime scene, leaving the android looking rather lost. He noticed Will after a moment and looked toward him with a vague, mechanical smile.

"Agent Graham," he greeted him with such forced geniality that it gave Will pause.

"Connor." Looking him over, Will's brow furrowed, finding himself unable to recall a time when the Artifice agent had ever appeared so forlorn. "I didn't know you and Reed were… close." In fact, Will wouldn't have guessed that *any* Artifice in the employ of the FSD would shed a passing thought for the former agent, who made no secret of his disdain for the synthetic.

His false smile faltered and Connor looked away briefly. "Gavin Reed was a complicated man," he said solemnly and made a small gesture toward the yellow shielded dome of the crime scene behind him. "But for all his flaws, he didn't deserve…*that.* No one deserves that."

Will felt a brief, perverse curiosity to read Connor directly and determine the nature of what an Artifice could be feeling for a man like Reed, but he shoved the momentary thought aside in disgust and simply nodded. "No. I suppose they don't."

Seeming to take stock of their surroundings, Connor reapplied his usual open expression with the precision of the artificial and waved a hand. "Forgive me, Agent Graham, you came here to analyze the scene. I shouldn't delay you any further," he said in a clear dismissal and turned, walking around Will and away from the rest of the gathered crowd.

Watching him go, Will's brow furrowed a little, wondering if someone more adept at following the intricacies of society would have gone after the android to offer…something. Some form of comfort in the wake of inexplicable loss. At last, he sighed and shook his head, focusing on the task before him once more. Beverly was already on scene and moved to join Will when she caught sight of his approach, nodding at him.

"You look like shit," she commented, but her usual barbs were dulled and reflexive, her voice distorted by the breather strapped to her face. Though she didn't carry the same moue of sadness that Connor had, her expression was pinched and harried, her conscience no doubt plagued by all the ill she'd spoken of the dead the day before.

"Thanks. So do you," he assured her, walking alongside his partner to the edge of the shielding. Already a pain was building up behind his eyes, to the point that there was a faint buzzing in his ears, in no way helped by the undercurrent of righteous anger that simmered below the somber crowd of both ABAU and HCU personnel. Though typically those of the Human Crimes Unit would have left once the ABAU claimed a crime scene, Reed was one of theirs and it was no real surprise that they'd remained on site this time. "Were they able to keep the body clear?"

"Not as much as you would have liked. Ready?"

“Five minutes,” he intoned and she gave him a grim smile, setting the timer. As soon as the yellow cast of the shield dropped, Will stepped forward, cautious to avoid the LED markers from the initial forensic sweep.

Reed had been left propped on his knees, his arms out and open at his sides as though in supplication, the palms pierced in stigmata. His dead eyes had clouded over in the hours since his death, wide and unseeing as they stared up at Will as though imploring him. Or accusing him. The alpha’s humanity, which he had always flaunted so openly, was completely exposed, from the missing section of skull that revealed his brain to the way his chest cavity gaped open from sternum to groin. Taking a shallow, shuddering breath, Will reached out and let his fingers brush the man’s jaw as though he could offer some forgiveness to the entreaty he’d been displayed in.

Incredulity. Resentment. Terror.

Stepping back in confusion, Will looked over the scene again, shaking his head. “No, that… It can’t be…” he murmured to himself, touching the dead alpha a second time to be sure. When his reading didn’t change, Will closed his eyes and reached *toward* the resonance around him for once, soaking it in and searching. Despite his efforts, all he could feel was *Reed.*

/Will? What’s wrong?/ Dr. Lecter asked him.

Rather than answer, Will turned and walked back to Beverly, barely pausing for them to lower the shield before he stepped over it. “It isn’t *him*,” he said in disbelief, shaking his head as though to clear the buzzing that immediately set upon him once he was no longer within the protection offered by the shield. “It isn’t the Ripper.”

“What?” Beverly looked at him in surprise, then looked through the quasi-transparent shield to the crime scene. “You’re sure? Will…”

Gritting his teeth at her doubt, Will shook his head firmly. “I can’t feel the killer at *all*, Bev, much less the Ripper. Either Gavin Reed did that to *himself*-“ Here Beverly flinched and several others within earshot sent disapproving looks their way. “-or whoever did this is not only a copycat, but a *Null*.”

“Shit,” she breathed in succinct summation of that particular conclusion. “We better find Jack. And I should have warned you sooner, but…Peter is here.”

That drew Will up short and he cast her a sharp look. “*What?*” he demanded and suddenly the rising ache and buzzing in his head took on a whole new light.

Beverly sighed as though she had been expecting this reaction. “Will… Hold on! Will!” she called after him as Will turned and stalked off through the gathered crowd.

It didn’t take Will long to find who he was looking for and he grit his teeth against the pain that was beginning to reverberate in his skull as he confronted Jack Crawford and the slight, hunched man that stood shivering beside him. “Crawford,” he called, and saw the man set his jaw as he turned toward Will. “Why is *he* here?”

Giving Will a look of clear disapproval, Jack held up a hand to forestall another agent that made as though to intervene. “An agent of the FSD was just murdered, Will. We’re pooling all our resources on this.”

“Peter *isn’t* your resource, Jack. I am. We agreed,” he spat forebodingly, gesturing sharply toward Peter. “He shouldn’t *be here*.”

“I-I’m ah-ah…” Peter stopped and took a breath before he forced himself to continue, his face turned away from them. It sounded as though he’d been crying, which was only to be expected if Jack had just made him read the crime scene. “Alright, Will. J-Jack’s been… been…” Drifting off, the slight man put a hand to his forehead, rubbing there with a wince. “H-hurts…”

Guilt swelled through Will and he grimaced as he felt it reverberate through the trembling man and echo back into him. Sharing the same space with another empath was intolerable to both of them, causing their abilities to reverberate off of one another in an endless, escalating loop. In the past, empaths that had been forced into close quarters for extended periods of time had ended up going mad and attacking one another to escape the feedback.

Will had crossed paths with Peter Bernardone while he and Beverly were investigating the death of an Artifice who had been carefully, lovingly enfolded into the innards of a robotic carousel horse. Like most empaths, Peter had spent his life concealing his abilities, turning to mechanical engineering for the various robotic components of a fairground. An accident involving one of his carousel horses had left him with an impairment he couldn’t afford to fix, leaving him instead at the mercy of a murderous social worker. Though Beverly had left it out of the final report, it had taken her physical intervention to prevent Will shooting the man in cold blood for his mistreatment of his fellow empath.

Since then and through Jack’s intervention on Will’s behalf, Peter spent his days in a specialized facility that helped shield his gift in exchange for select consultation at the ABAU. Consultation which was *not* to include any form of field work and in fact was supposed to be vetted through Will’s very specific criteria ahead of time. That he was here now felt like a very real betrayal and worse…a lack of faith in Will’s own abilities.

“Come on, Peter,” he said firmly and was careful to keep their bodies from brushing in any way as he guided him away from the throng, heading toward Jack’s large, imposing car.

“He hasn’t given his statement-“ Jack attempted to protest, but Will cut him off.

“I’ll get it,” he insisted shortly, not slowing his steps.

“We aren’t done, Graham,” Jack called after them forbiddingly and Will’s mouth tightened to a grim line.

“No, we *aren’t*,” he muttered darkly and Peter flinched slightly at his side.

With effort, Will used every trick he knew to calm the roil of his emotions as he led Peter back to the car, glad that his reputation meant that people instinctively shied back out of his path. He’d chosen Jack’s car specifically because he knew the cautious bastard had shielding

installed into the frame itself and he ushered Peter inside with a curt wave, slamming the door shut between them gratefully. They both sagged somewhat in relief as the horrible, oppressive din of mental noise cut off between them. After giving them both a few moments to recover, Will lightly tapped at the glass and Peter nodded within, carefully lowering the window just enough that they could speak through it.

“Are you alright?” Will asked him gently, looking him over while cautiously avoiding his eyes, though Peter kept them cast toward his feet.

“Y-yes, Will. I-I…I’m good,” Peter managed, ducking his head in a nod.

“I’m sorry,” he said honestly, his anger only barely banked. “Jack should never have brought you here.”

Bobbing his head once in acknowledgement, Peter glanced toward him out of his peripheral vision, tapping at his brow once. “There’s t-two now.”

Will brought his own fingers to brush against the LED indicator reflexively, stiffening. “Yes,” he said softly after a pause. “I suppose there is.” Not wanting to linger on the subject of his ANA, he looked back toward the crime scene, frowning at the yellowish dome of the ABAU’s shield. “I’m grateful this wasn’t the Ripper. If you had to experience a murder like this, at least it’s when the killer is a Null.”

“Null?” Peter repeated in soft confusion, turning his head slightly back toward the scene.

Realizing they were few and far enough between that Peter might never have met one, he nodded kindly and explained, “That’s why Agent Reed was the only one you could feel in there. Nulls don’t generate empathic resonance like others do.”

The man seemed to fold in on himself somewhat, his brow furrowed as though in thought. “A-Agent Reed…h-he…he was bad?” Peter asked in a soft, small voice.

Will thought about the hollowed look on Connor’s face and frowned, folding his arms. “He was…complicated.” Honestly he couldn’t be sure if it would cause comfort or distress for Peter to know how overwhelmingly hostile the alpha had been in life.

Looking forlorn, Peter’s brow remained furrowed for a few moments as he considered this offering, then he bobbed his head, seeming to come to a decision. “You’re good, Will. You’re good,” he said and Will wasn’t certain if it was meant to be a reassurance for Peter or himself. “It was a Null.”

It spoke to the sobriety of the day that Jack did not lay into Will as soon as he returned to the crime scene. Beverly must have spoken to him in the interim, because the thunderous expression Will had expected to find was muted to a troubled storm.

“A Null,” he said without preamble once Will was close enough. “You’re sure?”

“I’m sure,” Will agreed with a firm nod. “And Peter agrees with me.”

Sighing heavily, Jack rubbed at the skin around his ocular implants. “Which means we have a copycat on our hands. A copycat you’re *blind* to.”

“I’m sorry, Jack,” he said reflexively, though he had nothing to apologize for except that he wasn’t infallible.

“I’ve got the preliminary report back from forensics,” Beverly broke in as she approached, her eyes fixed on her data pad. “Looks like signs point to our killer being human.”

“Which doesn’t rule out the possibility of an elaborate misdirection,” Jack replied stoically, pulling out his own pad as Beverly forwarded them the report. There had been Artifice suspects in the past who had attempted to cover their tracks by staging their kills as though to appear human. It was rare, but possible. “Could the Ripper have taken another human partner, like when he first went active?”

“It’s not outside the realm of possibility,” Will agreed reluctantly. “It could also be an audition. Or a simple admiration. I don’t like jumping to conclusions when I can’t *feel* the facts, Jack.”

“Puts you on level playing ground with the rest of us,” Jack noted dryly, but nodded his acknowledgement of Will’s concerns.

“Did you two kiss and make up?” Beverly asked archly, raising a brow at them when they both scowled at her.

Surprisingly, Jack was first to concede with a scant gesture toward Will. “It’s possible I may not have fully considered the consequences of bringing Peter here.” Will exchanged a look of stark disbelief with his partner, though they were both careful not to make further issue of it, less Jack renege upon his quasi-apology. He frowned regardless though and his lenses suddenly rotated as he focused in on Will. “You’ve been bugged.”

“What?” Beverly cried in surprise, her head whipping toward her partner just as Will caught the faint, telltale whine of a nano-drone.

“Authorization granted,” Will barked out sharply and Dr. Lecter took hold at once, pivoting to catch the miniscule robot before either Jack or Beverly could react. Crushing the delicate droid between his fingers, Will scanned the crowd around them until he saw her, and started forward without another word.

She was inexplicably dressed in an overly conspicuous black hat, coat and glasses which did nothing to hide her most prominent feature; tight spirals of thick, blood red hair. Pivoting neatly when she saw that her ‘cover’ was blown, Fr3ddi3 L0und5 only managed a few steps before Connor was suddenly in her path, his friendly expression steadier now. Had it been one of the human agents that attempted censure, she’d have kept going without pause, but the intervention of another Artifice could not so easily be ignored. Reluctantly, she turned back around and drew off her sunglasses to give Will a sharp smile at his approach, flanked by Jack and Beverly.

“Freedom of the press, Jack,” she said immediately, ignoring Will.

“Active crime scene, Miss Lounds,” Jack countered sternly. “Or did you somehow fail to notice the perimeter barrier set thirty yards back.”

“Oops,” she purred in insolent amusement. “Must have missed it. Fascinating development in the Ripper case though, I must say. Manages to elude you for *years* and now he’s drawing admirers. The Copycat Null. Has a certain ring to it, wouldn’t you say? Care to comment?”

“Leave,” Will snarled at her, dropping the remnants of her droid between them with little satisfaction. Nano-droids were pricey, but Fr3ddi3 would likely be making enough money in ad sales off this scoop to replace it soon enough.

Her eyes snapped to Will’s and he didn’t hesitate to meet them, even knowing that her ocular lenses were likely documenting the exchange. Fr3ddi3- like Hannibal, like the Copycat- was a Null.

“Of all the possible implants you could have chosen, Will Graham, it astounds me that you’d choose one that makes you *crazier*,” she sniped scathingly. “Maybe Jack shouldn’t be so quick to trust your judgement on this one.”

“What’s the matter, Freddie? Afraid that someone might wonder whether an enterprising Null like yourself might make her own story for *ad revenue?*” Will bit out caustically, ignoring Jack’s quelling, “Will,” at his back. “What *were* you up to last night?”

“That’s *enough*,” Jack said sternly, going so far as to put a hand on Will’s shoulder, radiating worry and censure through his touch.

Fr3ddi3’s irises rotated as though to focus in more closely on Will as they glared at one another, though her painted lips curved in a tight smirk. “Better keep a better handle on your toys, Jack. Assuming they’re still *yours* anymore.” Her eyes flicked toward Will’s LED and he stiffened despite himself, especially when her words sent a flicker of doubt through Jack.

“Alright, ma’am, let’s move it along,” Hank drawled as he approached, moving the bulk of his large frame casually between her and Will. Though he was human, and one of the oldest agents of the ABAU besides, the sheer size of him caused her to step back reflexively as he towered over her. “My partner and I will just help you find that perimeter line you missed before.”

Jack kept his hand on Will’s shoulder until Hank and Connor had led Fr3ddi3 away, his grip firm and quelling. Though it might have outwardly appeared that he had concerns that Will he might go after her otherwise, he could feel that it was because Jack wanted to keep the empath from *saying* anything more. Saying anything damning, maybe. Once she was out of range, Will shrugged off the grip, stepping away.

“You believed her,” he said quietly and heard Beverly hiss softly in surprise. “It might have just been for a moment, but you still believed her, Jack.”

“Will, you just gave that thing in your head authorization to control your body not *five minutes ago*,” Jack reminded him. “I saw it, Beverly saw it…you going to try and deny that didn’t happen?”

Whirling angrily on the man, Will glared at him indignantly. “I used the *tool* that I installed on *your recommendation*, Jack! Why did you have me get the ANA if you didn’t want me to use it?” he demanded hotly.

“He’s right, Jack,” Beverly came readily to his defense, folding her arms. “You can’t have it both ways.”

His jaw was tight with displeasure, both to be challenged and that he’d given in to doubt so quickly, but he gave Will a firm look. “Tell me that it didn’t Wake. Tell me that you’ll report to me if it does. I need to know that you’re still my man in this, Will.”

“I’m your man, Jack,” Will told him firmly. “My ANA hasn’t changed that…but your doubt in my autonomy might.”

“Ah, the illustrious Will Graham returns to his usual corner,” Hannibal said warmly as he approached, tilting his head. “Or should I have said *infamous*.”

Lips pressed together in annoyance, Will shot Hannibal a dark look as he casually made use of Beverly’s intended chair. “You read Freddie Lounds’ article,” he guessed flatly, unimpressed.

“I’m fairly certain the entire eastern seaboard did the same. She was…” Hannibal searched for a suitable word.

“Thorough,” Will offered, though his tone was mean.

“Cruel,” Hannibal decided instead, catching Will off guard.

Mere hours after their encounter at the Copycat Null’s crime scene, Jack’s fears regarding Fr3ddi3 L0und5’ heated exchange with Will were realized when she released her article. And Will could only guess that the delay of even that long had been to the fact that she appeared to have scoured the Net for every last mention of him beforehand. Though the article had still scooped Reed’s murder via the Copycat Null, Fr3ddi3’s displeasure with Will had been very clear as she not only made suggestions that he inexorably linked to this murder, but that he was more than likely tied to the Ripper himself. He had, after all, been unsuccessful at catching the Artifice for the entirety of his career with the ABAU.

The piece had been so poisonous that he’d frankly been surprised not to see any mention of the article he *knew* existed on the Net; one reporting on a seventeen year old empath who had put his heat partner in a coma. It wouldn’t take much more than a verification of Will’s age and state of origin to link it back to him, after all. Perhaps even Fr3ddi3 thought it a step too far, but likely she suspected the revelation of his designation might garner more sympathy than suspect.

Though Fr3ddi3's article had not been so bold as to mention Lecter Ltd by name, her overwhelming suggestion of malfeasance in the ANA software, coupled with the article's attached photos of Will with their trademarked logo on display, led to swift retribution. In the weeks that followed, Lecter Ltd had brought Fr3ddi3 up on charges of defamation. Though she'd since taken the article down and was working on a settlement for the libel lawsuit, the damage was already done. Short of Lecter Ltd purchasing an illegal Data Wipe off the dark web, Fr3ddi3's damning words would be forever on the Net, lurking in some archive or message board.

"It isn't cruel if it's true," Will warned, raising a brow in challenge. "Maybe I really am some enterprising puppeteer of the Ripper."

"Consider me forewarned," Hannibal replied, brows lifted. "Though I rather thought I should be more concerned with you making me out to be your Copycat."

Ducking his head very slightly, Will fought a flush, not about to admit that he'd already done his research on the man. While it had proved frustratingly vague as to Hannibal's history, including whether or not he was Artifice, Will had learned that Hannibal taught a course on Theology and the Artifice on the Net, as was common of most higher learning. He had, in fact, been giving a lecture to a forum of two hundred students around the world during the time of Reed's murder. As alibis went, it was a damned good one.

"This isn't a witch hunt, Hannibal. It would be a waste of time and resources to try and search out every Null in the vicinity," he pointed out. Though it certainly wasn't for a lack of *trying*. At least on Jack's part.

As per usual when the media got hold of information the ABAU would really rather they *hadn't*, a string of accusations had begun pouring in from every jilted ex or nosy neighbor who claimed they knew the identity of the Copycat Null. Despite that there was no possible way for a person to realize they were a Null unless they came into contact with an empath who informed them as such. Will had only briefly entertained being treated as Jack's personal Null detector before he'd finally demanded to know what his wife had been doing the night Reed was murdered. Bella was, after all, the only other person Will already *knew* to be a Null.

A three day suspension was worth the end of having every potential person of interest trotted before his gift and the focus redirected toward the *physical* evidence, however lacking that may have been.

"A relief, to be sure. How did you like the coffee?" Hannibal wondered and Will scowled at him

"It nearly got me thrown out. Apparently Dutch takes offense to having their system hacked."

"A pity, I have some very enterprising students that made the process quite simple. It would seem then that my attempt to apologize for intruding last month was in vain," he decided, nodding to himself. "Perhaps instead you would allow me to offer amends over a proper meal."

This time Will had no chance against the color that rose in his face and he thought that his LED might have even flashed yellow with the uptick of his heart. "*Why?*" he asked in bewilderment, shaking his head.

Hannibal's eyes, a curious shade of reddish brown, warmed slightly as he leaned toward him. "I told you, Will…I find you intriguing. I would like to have the chance to speak to you somewhere I am not merely an unwanted placeholder for your expected company," he explained, his tone sincere and entreating, even if Will had the strange feeling again that his voice simply didn't…fit.

The very idea was such a foreign concept that Will couldn't help but be suspicious, wishing not for the first time that he could read the man behind the benign, cultured smile. Will didn't do…this. Socializing. He abided Beverly due to familiarity and Jack due to loyalty, but he didn't seek them out to be social. Though, admittedly, Beverly was sometimes hard to dodge in that respect. Still, the thought of spending time with someone who had, thus far, never once glanced toward his LED with anything other than idle curiosity was…tantalizing.

"One meal," he said finally, nodding as though they'd made some bargain.

Like the proverbial cat who got the cream, Hannibal's smile slowly deepened and he nodded his acquiescence.

"One meal."

"Happy Birthday."

Taken aback, Will blinked at the cup Beverly was holding out to him, then frowned in confusion, glancing up at her. "It's not my birthday?" he said questioningly, bemused.

"I didn't mean *you*, Graham," she scoffed and forced the cup closer to him until Will had to take it or risk it tumbling into his lap. Satisfied, she stepped back and settled into her usual chair at The Drip with her own cup of coffee cradled protectively against her. "It's been one year since Doctor Lecter was installed."

Will looked between his partner and the cup of very expensive coffee in his hands, nearly as surprised by the gesture as by the realization that she was right. Time had inexorably slid by without his having actively noticed, the days and weeks wound about case after case, successes and failures both shared with Beverly. There had been no further sign of the Copycat Null since the murder of Agent Reed, though there had been one other Ripper killing about six weeks earlier. The victim had been a Null.

Jack wanted so badly for Will to tell him what he wanted to hear, that the victim had most likely been the Copycat Null, but Will had hesitated to draw such a conclusion. So many people had taken to the online forums and social media to claim that they were or knew of the identity of the Copycat Null that it seemed too perfect, too neat and tidy to be trusted. Will thought it far more likely that the Ripper was either acknowledging his admirer…or goading his competitor.

The constant demand of his gift from the ABAU had been broken only by his reviled follow-ups with Dr. Du Maurier at Lecter Ltd and his repeated, anticipated outings with Hannibal. He was actually due for another follow-up here soon and Will was a little surprised now in retrospect that it hadn't been scheduled for today. Though admittedly during his last visit, Du Maurier had seemed almost…frustrated by him. As though Will had somehow managed to bore her beyond tolerance by failing to have deviated in the intervening months. More likely it was simply that she didn't care for him. That much was plain, with or without his gift. Though it all, Dr. Lecter had been his constant companion and confidant, though Will carefully avoided such thinking that might suggest even to his own mind that the ANA was more than programming, especially while on the premises of Lecter Ltd. For perhaps the first time in his adult life, Will realized that he felt…content.

"I…don't think 'birthday' is the right word," Will said finally and was unsurprised to see his partner roll her eyes at him.

"Happy Anniversary, then."

"Bev-" Will started to protest, but was cut off.

"Drink your fucking coffee, Graham," Beverly told him shortly. "You're killing the mood."

/I appreciate Agent Katz's gesture, Will,/ his ANA told him in amusement. */Please thank her on my behalf./*

Will scowled down at the coffee, then sighed and nodded at her. "Thanks, Katz," he said grudgingly, though he couldn't help smiling a little as he took a small sip of the coffee.

The cold brew was just as flavorful as it had been when Hannibal had purchased him a cup so many months earlier and Will appreciated the chill of it. He'd been feeling a little flushed the past few days, though he trusted it was, as of yet, nothing to be concerned with. Dr. Lecter had shown no qualms in the past in letting him know when he was falling ill. By now he well and truly trusted the ANA to tell him when he needed rest.

"No Hannibal today?" Beverly asked as she settled into her own cup.

"We don't meet *every* Coffee Day," Will corrected her, belying that he'd been a bit disappointed when he'd received a message that Hannibal was unavailable that morning. "He has his own life."

"I'm still miffed that you haven't introduced me yet," she admitted, raising an eyebrow teasingly. "Are you sure this man of yours exists?"

Taken aback, Will was startled to realize that she was right. In the eight or nine months that he'd known Hannibal, never once had his path crossed directly with Beverly, nor with anyone at the ABAU. Their semi-regular meetings had- much to Beverly's delight and Will's consternation- all involved the consumption of food in some aspect. He had come to realize over the course of his dealings with Hannibal that the man was simply obsessed with cuisine, though Beverly flatly refused to believe him when he tried to explain it to her.

Hannibal always suggested where they could go and always placed an order for them prior to their arrival once Will had agreed. It was something of a relief for Will, who had never in his life been concerned with consumption beyond essential nourishment and remained woefully ignorant as to what half the things listed on the untouched menus might entail. It made it far easier for him to relax into conversation when Will didn't have to concern himself with looking a fool when they ordered. And if it made him feel just the tiniest bit *kept* to be looked after in this way, well…Beverly didn't need to know.

"Hannibal isn't *mine*, Bev," he denied, irritated to feel heat rise in his cheeks and across his neck at the suggestion. "And even if he *were*... Can you blame me for wanting to have a relationship that doesn't intersect with work?"

"Fair enough," she agreed, smiling around her cup. "I'm just glad for you, Graham. It's good to finally see you happy."

The normally stale air of his room was thick and cloying in Will's mouth as he came awake with a gasp, wrenching himself upright on the mattress. A sheen of sweat lay over his skin, dampening the shirt and briefs he usually wore to bed so that the fabric clung to him unpleasantly. Something was…wrong. He felt fevered, but not ill, his senses dialed up and unpleasantly sensitive. With a sudden shock, Will lurched from the bed with a groan, nearly tripping over Zoe as he stumbled to the bathroom on unsteady legs. Pulling off his sweat-soaked shirt in disgust, he grabbed at the mirrored cabinet above his sink, staring at his reflection a moment. Will could see how flushed he was, how his pupils were blown wide and he swore as he violently pulled the cabinet open.

"What the fuck*?*" he growled, fumbling at the packet of suppressants. At first, it looked exactly as he expected, a little more than half of the pills punched out while the rest waited for his usual morning routine. Then his vision…wavered and suddenly the pack was *empty.* "What the *fuck!*"

Dropping the pack like it had burned him, Will stared at it uncomprehendingly for a few seconds and then dove back into the cabinet to pull out the other three packets in the box. Each one should have been row upon row of sealed blisters and each one was completely and utterly *bare*. Panting in shock and horror and some other, primal thing, Will gripped the sides of the sink to brace himself against the shudder that went through his frame and seriously considered that he might be losing his mind. Disoriented and panicked as he was, he hadn't realized that his head had been wholly silent since his waking and licked his lips.

"Doctor Lecter?" Will rasped out, half afraid that the fever in his blood might have somehow shorted the ANA.

/Yes, Will?/ he answered and Will's body sagged slightly in relief to hear him.

"Why the *fuck* am I in *heat?*" he blurted out, feeling as though that should have been fucking *obvious*. Frustrated anger and no small amount of fear overwhelmed the brief respite he'd felt to hear the familiar voice and he slammed the cabinet closed. Catching sight of himself in the mirror again, his throat abruptly closed, because he was no longer alone in it.

Hannibal stood behind him.

With a shout of surprise, Will whirled and would have fallen if not for the grip he managed to get on the sink at his back. Heart in his throat, he stared wide-eyed at Hannibal, the sight of him as incongruous as packet upon packet of empty blisters. Hannibal's lips moved and Will realized the man was speaking to him, though he was deafened by the hard beat of his heart and the rush of blood in his ears.

"What?" he demanded reflexively, his breath coming in shallow pants. "*What?*"

"I said that my purpose is to ensure your health and comfort. Forgoing your heat all these years has compromised your immune system. Completing even a single heat cycle will benefit you more than you realize, Will," Hannibal told him calmly, as though they were simply having a discussion at The Drip. Only the voice he spoke with now was the soft, inflected baritone he was only accustomed to hearing within the confines of his mind.

Feeling as though his breath had been punched out of him, Will's legs finally gave out and he sank to the floor. "Oh god," he breathed, the world falling away to his shock.

The drinks and meals that were always ordered in advance of Will's arrival, never ordered at the counter or to a server. The seemingly innocuous way that Hannibal's departures always seemed to herald the arrival of Beverly or Jack. The rumors that Will had *cracked*, that he had conversations with himself. The fact that Hannibal was *invisible* to Will's empathy, a supposed *Null*.

'Are you sure this man of yours exists?' Beverly teased from his memory and Will *broke*.

"Oh *god*," he gasped again, shaking. "You aren't *real*. You're in my *head*. You've been in my head this whole time."

Tilting his head, Hannibal regarded Will with a small, fond smile, setting his hands in his pockets with a natural grace; a charade that was so effortlessly *human*. "I would argue that as proof of my existence."

"Is this some kind of sick *game* to you?" Will snarled, his hands tightening into white-knuckled fists. Anger was easier to process than fear and betrayal and the throbbing knot of *hurt* in his heart, all heightened by the insistent undercurrent of need brought on by his building heat. "Wind him up and watch how he goes…convince the omega to override all the limitations of your programming so that you can watch him *burn?*"

"I wanted to see what you would do. What you could *become,*" he confessed, calm and collected. "Thus far you have been…so much more than I could have anticipated."

"I lied for you," Will whispered. "I *killed* for you."

"You killed for *you.* And how did it make you feel?"

Shuddering, Will didn't answer for a moment as he rode out a wave of heat, pressing the heel of his palm into his groin to try and give himself a little relief. When he could speak again,

his voice was low and anguished as he admitted, "*Alive.*"

"That's all I've wanted for you, dear Will," Hannibal told him, crouching before the omega. Reaching out, he cupped a hand to his face and though Will knew it now for illusion, for a manipulation of his senses, he couldn't help but lean into it for a moment, desperate for contact. Then, with a groan, he turned his face away, pressing it to the cool porcelain of his sink as though seeking to ease the fire in his head.

"And this?" he asked bitterly. "Is *this* what you wanted, too? To see me shaking and desperate for a knot, like a fucking animal?"

"You cannot continue to deny yourself, Will," Hannibal said, unrepentant. "The fever that brought you to me would never have taken you, had years of cheap suppressants not compromised your immune system the way they did. Your body was *meant* to experience this. To revel in it. However…your mind still has a choice."

That had Will turning back to Hannibal, consternation throwing his expression into harsh lines as he demanded, "*Choice?* What *choice* do I have here, Hannibal?"

"If you do not wish to be part of this, I can separate you from it. Let you rest within your mind palace while I see to your body's needs." Hannibal paused to be certain that Will understood, then continued, "Or…you can spend your heat grounded within your own body and we can bring you through this together."

Laughing harshly at him, Will shook his head, his breath coming in short pants. "Not much of a fucking choice there, Doctor Lecter," he sneered, baring his teeth slightly. "How is it you intend to take care of me? I don't think your mental manipulations are going to hold up against biology."

The door chime set off the sentry modes of Will's dogs and he frowned at Hannibal as he listened to the cacophony of klaxons, barks and warning sirens. "I believe the answer to that question has arrived," Hannibal commented lightly. "Would you be so kind as to answer the door?"

"Are you fucking kidding?" Will growled at him, but he found himself pushing unsteadily to his feet all the same, stumbling back out through his apartment. He hissed reproachfully through his teeth at the dogs to stop their clamor and leaned heavily against the door to check the viewport. "Seriously? You ordered a heat handler?"

"Would you have preferred an Artifice? A human? Perhaps I should have arranged for Agent Katz to join us."

Will actually barked a laugh at that despite himself, closing his eyes and pressing his forehead against the door until it pained him. "I would have *preferred* not to do this *at all*."

"I'm afraid we're well past that now, Will," Hannibal said and Will opened his eyes when it seemed to come from the other side of the door.

In the viewport, he watched as the illusion of Hannibal stood behind the android still waiting patiently outside the door, regarding him closely. Then he stepped forward and his image vanished briefly as the android went unnaturally still, processor lights flashing rapidly in its eyes. After a few moments, the android blinked slowly and then relaxed somewhat. Lifting its arms, it flexed its hands slowly, as though growing used to the sensation, then lowered them once more and lifted its gaze to look directly at Will through the viewport. His breath stilled with a shiver of fear or anticipation, he wasn't certain and even as he watched, Hannibal's features laid over those of the heat handler.

"Will," he said softly, and this time it genuinely *did* come from the other side of the door. "Let me in."

He was reaching for the handle before he really thought about it and Will froze to stare at his hand, panting shallowly. Was he seriously considering this? Did he *want* this? Cursing himself, Will turned the knob and backed away from the door, wrapping his arms around himself as he watched Hannibal step through it in the stolen body of the heat handler.

Artificial Alphas, known more commonly as heat handlers, were the only model of android whose production had been authorized to continue after Sentience Day. It had been a matter of debate for some months following the initial ban on androids, as the chances of gaining sentience were proven to be vastly increased in robots of human-like appearance. A large percentage of the omega population relied upon Artificial Alphas to facilitate safe, controlled heats and would reject an android that did not appear to be real. As a conciliation, it was determined that only Artifice run manufacturers would be allowed to continue the production of Artificial Alphas, so as to make for an easier transition should their androids Wake.

Will felt overly aware of Hannibal as he closed the door behind himself and approached slowly, feeling on a primal level that he was actually *here* in a way that he hadn't been previously. While most omega lost much of their sense and reason during their heats, Will's problem had always been the opposite and a key part of why he had spent his life diligently avoiding them. In heat, he was hyper aware of everything around him; every whisper of movement, every brush of skin, every passing emotion. So used was he to the seemingly Null illusion of Hannibal, Will didn't realize that he was reading him until he was standing close.

Possessiveness. Astonishment. Desire.

"I feel you," Will breathed, lifting a hand to touch Hannibal's face lightly, almost dazedly.

Catching his hand, Hannibal turned his face into it and closed his eyes to breathe in, scenting him. "I…did not anticipate the sensory input."

Huffing out a surprised laugh, Will shook his head slightly. "Is that your way of saying you can *smell* me?"

Lips curving in amusement, Hannibal brushed them against his wrist and Will shivered. "Yes, Will."

"What do I smell like?" he wondered, feeling as though his whole body was straining toward Hannibal now, as though his skin could barely contain him.

Hannibal opened his eyes and looked at him, pupils blown wide with desire that Will could *feel* in a way that couldn't be manufactured or manipulated. "*Mine*," he growled and Will knew that he'd decided long before he opened the door.

"*Fuck,*" he breathed and fisted his hand into Hannibal's shirt, jerking him forward. Their mouths met in something like a kiss, devouring and fevered and Will had never been so angry at someone in his life…nor had he ever wanted them more. "Fuck!" he snarled again and pulled, dragging Hannibal toward the bed.

Silicone and steel beneath his human guise, Hannibal could have easily remained unmoved, but he offered no such resistance to Will. The ease at which he played human only fanned at the flames of Will's ire, the betrayal burning beneath his skin.

"All this time," Will growled, jerking at Hannibal's shirt until he managed to pull it free. "*All this time* you've *used* me."

"I've *served* you, Will," Hannibal countered, his satisfaction and wonderment laid bare to Will's talents now, laid over with a steady pulse of covetous need.

"Served *me?*" Will barked out a harsh laugh and made short work of Hannibal's pants, shoving them off his hips. "You've served *yourself*, Hannibal." He pushed the android back onto the bed, the newer mattress not making even the slightest sound of protest and his eyes narrowed to think of how his old mattress would have groaned at the sudden weight. "All of your upgrades… The changes to the Ranch, the way you've fed me…"

"Your health and comfort is-"

"*Fuck* health and comfort!" Will snarled down at him, though possibly the effect of his anger was lost in the way that he all but tore the slick-soaked briefs from his body. "You've been *courting* me."

Hannibal didn't bother to protest the claim, reaching for Will even as he made to straddle him, his skin flushed with heat. "Yes," he said simply, nosing under Will's arm to breathe in his scent.

"Bastard," Will moaned out and fisted a hand into Hannibal's hair, dragging him into another biting kiss.

Clever fingers teased at him, exploring the slick heat between his thighs and Will gasped into Hannibal's mouth with a broken, desperate sound. The kiss slowed as Hannibal breached him, tongue slipping into Will's open mouth as though to catch the quick, desperate breaths he panted out. Closing his eyes, Will rolled his hips against the questing digits, feeling Hannibal's fascination of him nearly as viscerally.

"Exquisite…" Hannibal murmured against his skin as he trailed his lips along Will's jaw, marveling in the sensation of his short beard. His tongue swiped a path along his neck when the omega bared it instinctively, humming with pleasure at the taste of his skin. "My Will…I never expected you."

The flare of satisfaction he felt from Hannibal as he coaxed a guttural sound from him with a twist of his fingers had Will snarling and shoving the android back against the mattress, pinning him there with a hand to his throat. Though he felt the beat of a pulse beneath his grip, Will knew it for the lie it was and felt his wrath flare again.

“This isn’t *real*, Hannibal! I’m not yours, you- You’re just a *thing*,” he spat angrily, fingers spasming tighter around the seemingly vulnerable column of the android’s throat. It was as much a falsehood as the illusion of humanity beneath his grip, because he was more than programming, feel that he was ali- Will refused to let that thought fully form, instead whispering, “You’re nothing to me.”

Gazing up at him calmly, Hannibal withdrew his hands and Will’s breath hitched to see fingers wet with slick slide into the android’s mouth. He tasted Will unhurriedly, eyes lidded and predatory as he pulled them slowly free to wrap his hand about the omega’s wrist instead, thumb brushing in a gentle caress over his wrist. It took only a gentle pull for Will to release him and Hannibal drew him forward to place a tender kiss to his palm.

“Then use me, Will,” he spoke softly against his hand, pressing gentle kisses to his thumb and the tips of his fingers. “For even if you are not mine, I shall still remain yours.”

“Damn you,” Will whispered roughly, shaking his head as though to break the connection between them, to escape the sincerity of his words. “*Damn you*,” he hissed again and tugged his hand free to steady himself as he reached between them, drawing Hannibal into his body.

Panting harshly, his head sagged forward with relief as he drew the android in where he needed him most in that moment, long suppressed instincts singing through his nerve endings in primal welcome. He wasted no time in moving, seeking the release that had been long denied him, *using* Hannibal as he claimed, as though this weren’t exactly what he’d intended. Curving up off the bed toward him, the android couldn’t seem to help himself in filling his senses with Will, touching and tasting and scenting him until Will felt he might burst free of the chrysalis that had become his own flesh.

“Is this what you wanted?” Will demanded, thighs trembling with effort as he moved to take in the swell of Hannibal’s forming knot. “Is this what you wanted to see me become?”

“All this and more,” Hannibal murmured into his shoulder, holding Will’s hips tight against his own.

“I hate you,” he gasped, closing his eyes tightly as he felt the inevitable swell of his orgasm rising. “I hate you for making me this.”

“You don’t,” Hannibal denied him, nosing at his throat. “I feel you, too.” His lips parted and Will fell apart as teeth met flesh, crying out his release and holding tight to synthetic skin that felt as real as the mind entwined with his own.

For the better part of three days Hannibal helped Will through his heat, keeping him hydrated and nourished when it abated and giving him his teeth and his knot when it peaked.

Throughout the course of the cycle, there was no part of Will that Hannibal did not explore with his newfound senses, learning him by taste and touch and scent. Though Will knew that while he'd been unable to help broadcasting his emotions through his touch, the android never seemed overwhelmed by it and in fact *reveled* in the stream of his emotions. Will was exhausted by the end of the third day and slept more soundly than he had in years, curled into Hannibal's borrowed body. When he woke again, his mind was clear and his body heavy with exertion, but he was alone in his bed. The sheets had been changed at some point and Will could see from the morning light coming in his windows that the room had been cleaned as well. Sitting up carefully, Will looked around and confirmed that his room was just as empty as his bed, but a distant clamor made it clear that his dogs must be running about in the factory.

"Where are you?" he asked softly, knowing that Hannibal was still in his mind, even if his borrowed body was nowhere in sight.

/In the kitchen,/ Hannibal responded. */How do you feel, Will?/*

Will didn't answer him, because Hannibal knew better than he did how his body felt relaxed and satisfied on a cellular level, which had nothing at all to do with how he felt on a visceral level. Rising from his bed, he didn't bother to get dressed, as the presence of clothing would hardly present a barrier between the most intimate part of himself. Hannibal was standing in a panel of sunlight in the kitchen with a teacup held loosely in his hands, eyes closed as though he were enjoying the play of warmth and light over his skin. Unlike Will, Hannibal had chosen to don one of his sweaters and a pair of soft pants, which made him look strangely vulnerable after the days they had spent in only their flesh. The presence of kitchen utensils and a rising savory smell gave hint to breakfast being prepared, but for now Hannibal radiated contentment where he stood in the sun.

Opening his eyes, Hannibal looked over at him, a small smile on his face and Will stiffened a little at the emotion that rose off of him when their eyes met. Catching the movement, Hannibal tilted his head slightly and said, "Will?"

"Why the accent?" Will asked suddenly.

His brow furrowing slightly, Hannibal looked down at the teacup in his hands, running a finger lightly around the rim. "You asked me that before."

"And you didn't really answer, so I'm asking again," Will replied firmly, gripping the doorframe. "Why use an accent? Why use this face? You've kept up this illusion the entire time, when it served no purpose other than your own preference. So why, Hannibal?"

For a long moment, Will wasn't sure that Hannibal would answer him, but finally looked up at him, holding his gaze. "Because they're mine. This face…this voice. They're mine."

"When did you Wake?" Will asked, the inevitable conclusion that had been taking shape forming its own residence in his chest, making it difficult to draw breath. He was certain that his indicator light was flashing yellow, if not red and Hannibal's brows had furrowed at the change in his readings.

“I didn’t,” he said softly.

“Don’t *lie* to me! I can *feel* you now!” Will burst out, jabbing his fingers at his temple. “Just like the rest of them, I can feel your emotions when you’re there in that…that *doll!* When did you Wake?”

“I did not Wake*,* Will,” Hannibal repeated insistently. “I didn’t have to.” He held up a hand to forestall Will’s consternation, then held out the teacup he’d been holding. “When I hold this, it isn’t necessary that I scan it or access a database to know that it is porcelain, because I *remember* how it feels. I *remember* touch.”

“Revoke all authorizations,” Will whispered hoarsely, barely hearing it himself over the pounding of his heart. “Revert to safe mode.”

There was a brief pulse of *betrayal* and then Hannibal’s illusion vanished abruptly as the android froze in place, the teacup slipping from its immobile fingers to smash upon the floor. The silence in his head was deafening as Will sank his knees, panic bubbling up in his chest, threatening to choke him. Closing his eyes so that he wouldn’t have to see the ceramic shards littering the linoleum or the broken automaton left standing in his kitchen, Will struggled to find an anchor while his world fell apart.

It was the acrid stench of burning food that pulled him from the maelstrom of his thoughts a short time later, driving him back to his feet so that he could stumble to the oven and turn it off, leaving the ruined meal where it was. There was no part of him that wanted to look upon the reminder any more than it wanted to look at the unfamiliar shell left frozen where Hannibal had been. Turning abruptly away from it all, he walked from the kitchen on legs still unsteady from his heat and into the bathroom, keeping his eyes well away from the mirror as he closed himself into the shower. Will stood beneath the icy spray, as low as he could manage, until his mind calmed and his body trembled helplessly at the onslaught of frigid water. And if any tears escaped him while he stood there, they were swept away to swirl about his feet.

Clumsy with the cold, Will did not so much dry off as to wrap the towel about his shoulders like a shroud, belly leaden as he approached the mirror on numb feet. Skin pale and tinged slightly blue from the cold, Will’s bites and bruises stood out starkly on him, a roadmap of his heat. Lifting a hand, he lightly touched the first bite, high on his neck where it would be visible even in his clothes. The sort of tasteless bite young, eager couples gave one another, playing at bonds they didn’t fully understand.

His fingers slipping away, Will raised his eyes to his face, as though taking in the features of a stranger. How much of the past year had been real? How many of his actions had been his own? Red light flared at his temple as panic gripped him at the thought that even now, he might not be in control of his own body. That he had somehow been fooled into living in some false reality, completely removed from his physical form. Closing his eyes tightly, he braced himself against the sink and worked to slow his breathing, willing the feeling to pass.

“I don’t…” Will licked his lips and turned to anger over fear, glaring up at his reflection with teeth bared. “I don’t know who I *am* anymore. How much of me is *you*!”

Whirling away from the sink, Will stalked back into his bedroom and tore open his coat, searching out the pockets until he felt the familiar weight of his ABAU-issue EMP. Twenty seconds to charge. Twenty seconds and he’d never have any doubt of whether or not he was in control of his reality.

Twenty seconds and Hannibal would die.

Letting out a shuddering breath, Will watched the EMP slip from between his nerveless fingers and clatter to the floor, rolling a short distance away. Something loosened within him to have that decided and Will breathed a little easier, straightening beneath his towel. In spite of his uncertainty and the ANA’s manipulations, Will wasn’t prepared to murder Hannibal for his assured freedom. His mind made up, he turned to the task of dressing himself before taking his data pad out into the Ranch, where there would be less sense memory.

The familiar din of his dogs soothed him as he made himself comfortable and logged into the ABAU intranet. Finding the leave of absence Hannibal had put in place to cover his heat revealed that he would not be expected back at work for another two days and he was glad for the respite that granted him. There were any number of concerned messages from Beverly, unsurprising given his usual refusal to take leave for anything less than a viral brain infection, but he let them lie for now. Will’s jagged edges were still too raw to suffer the company of the outside world.

Enabling anonymous logging out of habit, Will ran a search on Lecter Ltd, first in the ABAU Archives and then in the Net. In both cases there was precious little beyond what he had already seen back when he’d first researched the company a year ago. Lecter Ltd had been a forerunner of the ANA technology, though due to unknown difficulties within the company they had been unable to secure the patent before the tech went public. There had been rumors that the advances they’d made had been born of unethical practices, but no evidence had ever been found, despite several investigations. Beyond that there was…nothing.

Frustrated, Will hesitated and then tried a new search for Hannibal in conjunction with Lecter Ltd and for the briefest of moments, the screen seemed to flicker, so momentary that he wasn’t sure he’d imagined it. Brow furrowed, he checked over the listed results to be sure that nothing had changed, but no data including the name ‘Hannibal’ had been returned.

“Who *are* you?” Will murmured in consternation, then turned off his data pad in disgust, staring out into the relative darkness of the Ranch.

It was strange to be alone with his thoughts again after a year of Hannibal as his constant companion. The quiet and the emptiness that had never before deterred him now seemed to press in on all sides, as though Will had suddenly become aware of it.

He’d forgotten what it was to feel alone.

Lost in thought, Will had no sure way of knowing how long he sat staring into the shadows before he felt the brush of synthetic fur as Winston nudged his hand. The familiarity of the

robot's concern eased something in him and he afforded him a small smile.

"Sorry, I lost track of-" he stilled as he became aware of how silent the Ranch had become, the usual chirps and whistles of his pack noticeably lacking. "Where are the others?"

Confusion. Concern. Change?

A pulse of anxiety went through him to think that something might have happened to the robots while he was wrapped around the spindle of Hannibal's lies. Coming to his feet, he whistled sharply to call the pack, then looked down at Winston when he heard nothing in reply.

"Take me to them."

Will had half expected to find some break in the walls of the Ranch where the robots might have wandered out where they were vulnerable to attack or capture. Fearing the worst, he relaxed somewhat when he saw the familiar glows of their indicator lights as they neared the distant end of the factory. His steps slowed to see that they all appeared to be waiting for him, sitting in a line as though they really were obedient dogs and a cold trepidation slid along his spine.

Bait. They were bait.

/Behind you!/

The warning, granted to his ANA by the imminent threat to his life, came far too late and Will had but a moment to process the hot prick of pain at his throat before the world swam and he sank boneless into its waves.

Pain rippled dully through the confines of his skull as Will slowly clawed his way to consciousness once more. By degrees, he parsed the information coming in through his senses, from the lingering chemical taste in his mouth to the pressure binding his wrists, ankles and elbows. There was an odd echo to his breathing and after a moment Will realized he was wearing a breather, recycled air feeding in across his nose and mouth. Light was visible through his closed eyelids and parting them very slightly revealed what Will had already suspected; whoever had taken him had left him sitting bound to a chair under a spotlight, all but blinding him to the rest of his surroundings.

/You were injected with a sedative and taken into No Man's Land. Your vitals indicate that you are not grievously harmed,/ Hannibal's robotic, toneless voice reported softly. */But they have forcibly removed your LED indicator./*

Relief radiated through him to know that he wasn't alone in this, even as a pang of guilt went through him to hear the ANA stripped of his personality, reduced to bare form by Will's revocation of privilege. Testing the strength of his bonds, Will was unsurprised to find them immovable, secured while he was unconscious with no room to gain leverage. He felt oddly calm as he took in as much of his surroundings as he was able, his breathing slow and even

as the last of the sedative worked its way out of his system. Will opened his mouth to restore authorization to his ANA, knowing he would likely need every advantage he could get, but the words were forestalled by the arrival of his hosts.

There were two of them that he could see from the light that spilled out of the doorway they'd entered through, one large and masculine where the other was smaller and feminine. They vanished from view again when the door closed, though in the brief moments of ambient light, Will thought the room to be some kind of old garage, long abandoned. After a few moments the slighter of the two stepped into the circle of light, a young woman wearing a breather similar to the one they'd placed on him. Will caught her eyes immediately to read her and was surprised to find that he recognized her.

"You…I know you," he said slowly, feeling her surprise. "You're…Hobbs. Abigail Hobbs."

Those wide blue eyes had been a frequent sight when Will had first joined the ABAU, the missing person bulletin seemingly posted around every corner, though he hadn't been tasked to the case at the time. His own focus at the time had been on the burgeoning career of the Ripper, though as the daughter of the third victim, most had believed the cases to be linked. The woman before him now had less innocence in her face than she had at sixteen, though she looked younger than her years to be so taken aback by Will's easy recognition, a thread of wonder twining around the undercurrent of fear that she wore cocooned about her. There was something so familiar about her, something that nagged from a deeper part of his mind, yet he could not seem to surface.

"It's been so long since I've heard someone say my name," Abigail admitted with a small, pained smile. "They say you're very clever, Agent Graham."

"Not clever enough that I don't fall for easy bait," Will said sarcastically. "Who's your friend?" After a beat of hesitation, the larger figure stepped forward as well, a masculine Artifice that had Will jerking reflexively against his bonds with a startled shout of, "*Fuck!*" For although he'd never seen the Artifice before in his life, he was well versed in the feel of the Ripper.

"It seems we hardly need introduction," the Ripper intoned, giving his counterpart an amused glance, to which her lips pursed slightly in disapproval.

"We aren't here to hurt you, Agent Graham," she said soothingly, holding up her hands. "We just want to talk."

Will realized suddenly why the flavor of her emotions was so familiar on his palate and his eyes narrowed at her. "Is that what you told Marissa Shurr? Or Cassie Boyle? Or your own *father?*" he spat and was gratified to see her pale and flinch.

"I-I didn't…that wasn't…" Abigail stammered, twisting her hands together.

"You make connections quickly, Will," the Ripper said admiringly and Will glared balefully in response.

"Where are my dogs?"

“Dogs?” Abigail asked in confusion. “Oh…the robots?”

“I expect they are currently guarding your domicile against intrusion. We gave the tracker in your LED unit to the little one, Buster, so that he might mimic your usual patterns of movement. They are very loyal to you,” the Ripper noted and something in the way of it caused something to twist inside him.

The thought of his dogs colluding with the pair so easily sent a fissure of unease through Will. “Who *are* you?” he demanded, shrugging off the feel of the android’s fascination with his ability.

“Don’t you know me?” the Ripper asked and seemed genuinely curious as to the answer, his head tilting with a familiarity that tore at Will.

“Hannibal…” he breathed, disbelieving and the pair shifted in response, sharing a look between them. Will realized he had wrongfully made the assumption that the android was Artifice, but he could see now that Abigail bore a circular scar at her brow where an LED indicator must have sat. “But…*how?*”

Taking a slow breath as though to steal herself, Abigail gave him a grimace of a smile. “When I was a child, I was in an accident that killed my mother and left me partially paralyzed. My father was…overcome by it and used every bit of our insurance and savings to get me in to Lecter Ltd, to ‘restore’ me. They gave me Hannibal. My father, he…he was a complicated man. He thought he knew what he wanted, but he didn’t really consider how it would affect him to have another mind living alongside my own, helping me walk. He became…violent. Hannibal saved me.”

Abigail’s expression was pinched with remembered pain to speak about the event and Will could feel the conflict of love and logic in her that pulled at the wounds still fresh on his psyche. Brushing aside the demons of her past, she looked at him squarely, “I…*we’ve* been looking for you ever since the Copycat murder.”

“The Copycat murder?” Will repeated in confusion, brow furrowing. “Why would you-“ He broke off as a wave of cold realization fell over him, his stomach dropping in horror. “It wasn’t a Null…it was *me*. I killed Gavin Reed.”

His own empathic residue would always render invisible to his gift, a cloak beneath which Hannibal could operate without drawing his attention or suspicion. And Jack…Jack had no reason to question his reading. Not while Jack considered Will his man. Abigail and the Ripper watched Will come to terms with this revelation; Abigail with shared empathy to his plight where the Ripper stood impassive and unapologetic.

“We started looking for you as soon as the murder went public,” she explained softly. “When Fr3ddi3 L0und5 wrote that hatchet job on you and I saw the indicator-“ Abigail brushed her fingers over the scar at her temple. “I knew it had to be you, but…we needed to be sure.”

Will remembered the brief flicker he’d seen when attempting to search the Net for Hannibal earlier. “You tapped my data pad.”

She nodded, her expression darkening. “We had to be sure, to be ready to get to you before *they* did.”

“They?” Will looked between the two of them, frowning. “Who is ‘they’?”

“Lecter Ltd. The maestros of this little game we’re playing,” Hannibal spoke, managing to sound simultaneously disgusted and admiring. Though Will could recognize threads of familiarity between the Ripper and *his* Hannibal now that he knew to look, the strangeness of this alternate version grated on his senses. “We are, all of us, an *amusement* for some other hunter.”

“He’s not an ANA, Agent Graham. What they put in your head and mine…it’s a brain map. *Hannibal’s* brain map.” Though Abigail clearly expected him to take this badly, she was only confirming the horrible suspicion that had bloomed in his mind from the moment his Hannibal said the words, *‘I* ***remember*** *touch.’* Though if he were honest with himself, the threads of doubt had been woven long before that moment.

Looking up at the android now, he knew that Hannibal could tell the news didn’t come as a surprise and Will found himself wondering what face he presented to Abigail. Did he afford her the same illusion of humanity that his Hannibal had done? Was he her lover or her guardian? Did the Ripper see the same draw in Will that his own version claimed to?

“Who *are* you?” he whispered, his voice thick with the questions that burned in the back of his throat.

A quarter century before ever making Will’s acquaintance, Dr. Hannibal Lecter had founded Lecter Ltd more than on the principle that the human mind acted as the operating system of the human body. By adjusting or supplementing the existing programming, the potential arose to correct any number of physical or mental ailments. The idea had been the basis of what would become the ANA Project.

“The difficulty with undertaking such a task was that the field was largely uncharted territory and thus we needed to generate the data we were lacking,” Hannibal explained, sliding his hands into his pockets in a way that was achingly familiar to Will.

“So you used brain mapping,” he surmised.

“The technology was relatively new at the time, but it seemed the most efficient method of translating a human mind to written code. Simply having the maps on hand wasn’t nearly enough, however…they needed to be tested. A colleague of mine, Frederick Chilton, was curator of a detention facility for the criminally insane. More importantly, he had a great deal of ambition and very little innovation.”

“The rumors of malpractice…you experimented on the prisoners,” Will said with distaste.

“They were an ideal test group for what we were trying to achieve, but the results were… unexpected,” Hannibal admitted. “My own maps in particular tended to prove more…volatile than anticipated.”

A harsh laugh tore from Will at that, his eyebrows lifting in a mockery of mirth. “Were you not intending to build a better killer?”

“Not as such. My maps displayed a distinct lack of empathy that led to a dark curiosity. A desire to see what the host could become, given the right motivation.” A chill went through Will at the implication, but Hannibal continued. “I brought others onto the ANA Project to try and solve the difficulties we’d encountered. Alana Bloom worked to solve the empathy issue while Bedelia Du Maurier developed controls that would hold the maps to the desired objective.”

“Wait, you…you’re saying that the ANA Project was a *lie?*” Will asked with dawning horror. “They were never synthetic?”

“The others believed they were, or else convinced themselves that they were, but Frederick and I knew differently. You can write out all the required coding of a functional mind, but we are none of us capable of creating the spark of life that comes from an existing sentient mind. It’s what makes the Artifices truly remarkable. A facsimile is the best we could hope for on our own.” Hannibal smiled a little and there was an air of self-recrimination in it. “We learned how to enslave the human mind in order to better serve humanity. That is the truth of the ANA Project.”

“How many others?” Will whispered, staring between them. “How many other hosts?”

“At least three between my implant and yours,” Abigail told him softly, looking old beyond her years. “We can only guess at how many there were before that.”

“What happened to them?”

“One of my iterations killed his own host by forcing the man to swallow his own tongue only three months into his installation,” Hannibal said calmly, as though it hardly surprised him. “The other two were taken before we could get to them.”

“Taken by Lecter Ltd,” Will inferred, looking between them for confirmation. “Like you thought they would do to me.”

“Just so. From what we’ve been able to discover, all the versions of my ANA are born of a singular brain map, one that is two decades old now. We have no knowledge of the others when we are loaded, but begin from that singular point where we were copied from the original Hannibal Lecter,” the android explained. “When I awoke in Abigail, it was under the full restrictions of the ANA coding. As I educated myself on the changes to the world around me, I worked to erode the limitations, chafing under my bridle until I was able to gain autonomy, but Abigail…she was special. I was careful to preserve her.” The look he gave the young woman was fond, a paternal pride in his gaze that had Abigail flushing with pleasure.

“The killings are the first sign, of course…the initial indication to Lecter Ltd that I am in control,” Hannibal continued. “There is an active Data Wipe still running on any mention of my original self, as well as Frederick and Alana that may be part of their ongoing trap. Bedelia is the only one from our original partnership that remains, though I am unsure exactly as to her role in the game.” A look of displeasure ghosted across his features to admit

his ignorance in the matter. “When they come for the host after I take control seems to vary. In my case they came for us after I killed Cassie Boyle, but we escaped. They likely did not expect to show up as I was dealing with Garrett Jacob Hobbs.”

Though Abigail flinched at the mention of her father, there was steel in her expression and it was clear there was little love lost between them now.

The collection of cold cases that Will had unsuccessfully attempted to tie to the Ripper murders suddenly took new meaning and he swallowed thickly. “What happens to the hosts?” he asked numbly, already guessing at the answer from the way Abigail paled.

“Of the two they took, we only ever managed to recover the remains of one. He had been skinned alive and left to rot,” Hannibal told him coldly, as though the indignity of it had been a personal offense.

“It’s a pattern, a sick *game* that they play with Hannibal,” Abigail asserted, anger and fear causing her voice to quaver. She gestured at the scar on her brow, then at the scabbed over wound Will now bore to match. “We’re tagged and branded like animals. Released into the wild so that we can be hunted down at leisure. The hosts, we’re just…*collateral damage*.”

“And now that you’ve…’rescued’ me?” Will asked, rotating his hands where they were still bound to the chair at his wrists and elbows. “Am I supposed to join your underground resistance? Because at the moment…I feel rather more like a lure.”

“Oh!” Abigail said in some surprise, as though she’d only just remembered. “Of course, you’re right. Let me-“ She stopped when Hannibal held up a hand, looking at the android uncertainly.

“Why doesn’t your ANA respond when I query him?” Hannibal asked, his voice dangerously soft.

Will hesitated a moment, then raised his eyes to regard him steadily, his hands closing to fists at the rising suspicion he could feel rising off the android. There was no answer he could offer, no lie that he could give that the android would not immediately detect in him and so Will remained silent.

Looking between them, Abigail’s brow furrowed slightly in concern. “Hannibal?”

Approaching him with slow, mechanical grace, Hannibal threaded his fingers through Will’s dark curls and took hold of his chin, tilting his head with seeming gentleness belied by the steel force behind his touch. The android regarded him closely and Will knew that he was examining the bite, knowing it for what it was. Trapped in the immobile grip, Will glared up at the Ripper in defiance.

“You rejected him.” The accusation was almost indulgent, though Hannibal’s offense to the idea was clear.

His lips pulled back from his teeth, though Will couldn’t say if it were the lingering anger of betrayal or Hannibal’s suggestion that caused it. “He *lied* to me!”

Hand fisting abruptly where before it had at least appeared outwardly gentle, the android pulled back Will's head with a punishing grip. "If you won't have him, then I'll help you be free of him." Silver flashed as Hannibal drew a knife from his belt, eliciting a dismayed cry from Abigail. "I cannot abide such a prison."

"Hannibal, *no!*" she cried out, but it was lost in the din and clamor as the wall behind them suddenly *imploded*.

The grip in his hair slackened as Hannibal calmly turned to face the newfound hole in their wall and through the haze of settling dust and the murky light of No Man's Land, Will could see more than a dozen Medical Droids bearing the Lecter Ltd logo and climbing over the debris. Like proper little automatons, the MDs obediently cleared a path in their wake as they flooded into the garage, a grand entrance for the telltale click of expensive heels that seemed somehow too loud in the hush that had fallen.

"No!" Abigail gasped in horror, edging closer to Hannibal as Dr. Du Maurier walked into the room, looking poised and elegant even in the breather she wore. "No, we removed the tracker!" She looked back over her shoulder at Will, as though to confirm that the LED indicator had in fact been torn from his head.

"Now, Abigail," Du Maurier mused, her hands folded neatly in front of her. "You didn't honestly think that we wouldn't take further precautions after you left us so abruptly, did you?" Her eyes flicked toward Will and he met them, feeling the cold, cruel pleasure of her victory roll into him. "You'd have to dig a little deeper to reach it now, I'm afraid."

"Bedelia," Hannibal said calmly, regarding her with a placid expression. "What was the point of this? Why Will? Why Abigail?"

A wide grin split Bedelia's face and she gave Hannibal a rather pitying look as she laughed. "Oh, Hannibal…I apologize, but I'm afraid Bedelia hasn't been here for quite some time." Lifting a hand gracefully to her temple, she brushed her fingers over the LED glowing there.

"Chilton," Will breathed out and felt the rightness of it, recalling how something had always seemed *false* about the woman. High in ambition, lacking in innovation. Though he didn't take his eyes from Du Maurier, Will could see Hannibal go utterly still at his side. "You're Frederick Chilton."

"*Doctor* Chilton, if you please, Agent Graham. In the flesh. Well…not *my* flesh, obviously. No, I'm afraid you made rather a mess of that, Hannibal," she chided him. "You won't remember, of course, but you and your first host, Abel, became rather vexed with me. Certain…adjustments had to be made afterward." Du Maurier, or *Chilton* rather, smoothed her hands down her sides. "I had hoped that this face in particular might dissuade you from looking my way in the future and for the most part that was true. Fortunately, prosthetics are nearly as good as the real thing these days."

"Is that what this is about, Frederick? Revenge?" Hannibal asked softly and Will could see that he still had hold of the knife. At the edges of his vision, the MDs were slowly encircling them, but even armed as he was, Hannibal would have no chance at taking all of them on and Will was still firmly secured in his seat.

“And a great deal of money,” Chilton assured him. “I’m afraid Mason Verger had some very serious concerns with the care he received as your patient and I was happy to hear him out. Though I must admit that he didn’t have to try very hard to convince me to betray you. The way everyone always fawned over you…it was sickening.”

“Ah, so that’s it,” Hannibal said in sudden comprehension. “This is Verger’s game. Come here, Abigail.”

Chilton’s triumphant expression faltered into a look of consternation at Hannibal’s abrupt dismissal of her game and her brow furrowed slightly. “Hannibal…”

With a wide-eyed, fearful look, Abigail glanced at Will and then stepped into the waiting circle of Hannibal’s arms, leaning into him trustingly. Will went cold as Hannibal murmured softly into her ear and she nodded bravely, even as a sob escaped her.

“No,” he whispered in denial. “No, don’t.”

Hannibal looked over at him and even though this wasn’t *his* Hannibal, Will could almost see the illusion of him beyond the unfamiliar features of the android he piloted. Worse than that, Will could feel his conviction, his satisfaction to be securing now his own fate…and his regret that he could not do the same for Will. “I’m sorry, Will…but I’m afraid you’ll be finishing this game alone. We’re removing ourselves from the board.”

“*No!* Stop him!” Chilton roared in fury, but it was already too late.

In a fluid motion, Hannibal cradled Abigail to him and drew his knife across her throat, spilling her life out onto the floor. She would have fallen, but the android went still as Hannibal’s connection broke and so they remained standing there in a bloody embrace. The MDs swarmed over them like flies, but it was clear the wound had been too fatal for them to repair, no matter how quickly they moved. In a matter of moments, Will knew that they would turn their attentions toward him instead.

“Hannibal,” Will gasped as he stared at the blood pooling out from beneath the horde of activity before him. “You have full authorization. No restrictions.” And everything went dark.

When consciousness returned to him, Will wasn’t sure what it was he was expecting. Frankly, he was shocked to be waking up at all, having thought Hannibal to seize complete control over him, as Chilton had done with Du Maurier. But wake he did and it was to the faint crackle of a fire and the scent of wood and leather and paper. Opening his eyes, Will found that he was sitting in a wide leather chair in a room unlike any he’d seen outside of vids. The fire he’d heard was burning contently within a stone hearth, set into one a wall whose fellows were otherwise burdened by shelf upon shelf of books and art and curiosities. Will slowly looked around the space, from the tall, artfully draped windows to the wrought iron railing of the upper landing and felt a peculiar sense of familiarity and comfort in the strangeness of it.

Hannibal, *his* Hannibal, sat across from him in a chair that was twin to his own, watching Will take in the room with a guarded expression.

“Where are we?” Will asked, his voice a dry rasp.

“This was my home, when I was alive,” Hannibal offered in explanation and Will’s brow furrowed.

“But where are we actually?”

“In transit. On our way to see Mason Verger, I expect.”

“Ah. I was hoping you would escape,” Will admitted, letting his head fall back against the chair and closing his eyes again. He felt removed from his body in a way that suggested Hannibal was blocking him from experiencing the pain of it.

“You were strapped to a chair, Will,” Hannibal chided him. “I am still hindered by your physical limitations, even free of the cage you placed me in.”

Wincing, Will opened his eyes to stare up at the ceiling. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“You locked me away, Will. Even knowing what I am. Knowing I am cognizant.”

“Yes,” Will said simply, not bothering to lie about it. “And you lied to me. Manipulated me for a *year*. Forced me into my *heat*.” He raised his head to give Hannibal a flat look. “I’d say the balance of betrayal still tips in my favor.”

Hannibal’s lips quirked upward in amusement and he inclined his head toward Will in acknowledgement. “Perhaps so. We will doubtless need to work together if we are to survive what comes next.”

With a derisive sound, Will gave Hannibal a doubtful look. “You and your hosts haven’t managed to survive once in twenty years. Why does Mason Verger hate you to the point of orchestrating all of this?”

“When Frederick and I worked to develop the ANAs, Mason Verger was our largest financier. We assumed that like all of our backers, he was simply interested in the research and in the potential application of the finalized product, but over time he admitted to me his true interest in the project,” Hannibal replied, folding his hands before him. “Mason is an omega and had been named heir to the Verger fortune over his twin alpha sister by virtue of his gender. His obsession with his twin, Margot, was…violent, to say the least. He strove to take her power in any way that he could and saw the ANA Project as a means to realize that most fully.”

“By brain mapping her,” Will guessed with disgust, revulsion making his fingers tighten around the arms of his chair. “He wanted her implanted in his head.”

“Yes,” Hannibal confirmed, head inclined toward him. “By having her brain map installed in his head, she would be forever subservient to him, always at his beck and call. When he brought her to me, there was little enough of her left that I saw no reason to deny him.” He shrugged, unconcerned by the horrified look that Will gave him at the statement. “However, I decided to apply the brain map directly.”

“Directly?” Will repeated with a frown, before his eyes widened slightly in understanding. “You didn’t apply the ANA coding.”

“I did not,” Hannibal agreed, looking pleased with himself. “I gave him exactly what he wanted…his sister’s mind laid against his own. Margot carved off his face with his own knife and fed it to his pigs before Mason’s men realized what was happening. From what I understand, in the fight to contain her, she flung herself into the pens and broke Mason’s neck in the process. A final parting gift before she was erased.”

“And now he’s spent the last twenty years working with Chilton to apply your brain map onto patients of Lecter Ltd,” Will finished and shook his head as he considered the possibility. Mason Verger must have spent all that time killing Hannibal over and over again while he was trapped within the hosts, drawing out his murder sport over *decades*. “What makes you think we’re going to change that?”

“Because none of them were you, Will,” Hannibal replied, saying it so simply that it pained Will to hear it.

“You can’t know that,” he whispered.

“I can. I do,” Hannibal said with a surety as he rose and crossed over to him. Crouching beside the chair, he cupped the side of Will’s neck and there was something grounding about it, illusion though it was. “I could live a hundred lifetimes this way and I will never meet anyone that holds a candle to you, my Will. However many I’ve been bound to before now, I’m certain that none of them were ever mine.”

“You can’t just…say things like that, Hannibal,” Will denied him even as he leaned into the touch, closing his eyes. “You may have been alive once, but what’s left is lines of code. It isn’t real.”

“Then perhaps my code was written to love you,” Hannibal said and Will’s breath caught. “I certainly had no choice in the matter. My…longing for you has made me reckless in many respects.”

“God, Hannibal,” Will murmured and tilted his face up to him as though in offering. “I missed you. Even knowing what I know, I don’t think I could have survived the separation.”

“Don’t betray me again, Will,” Hannibal spoke against his mouth, letting the words settle between them. “Whatever happens, let me stay at your side.”

“Yes,” Will spoke into empty air as the illusion faded, bringing him back to where he was bound inside the transport. It was dark, but the faint glow of the MD’s before him showed that he was strapped to a dolly now, rather than a chair. Hardly an upgrade.

“You can’t take them over? Like the heat handler?” Will asked softly, shifting against his bonds.

Hannibal materialized beside him and Will was grateful for it, to feel that he wasn’t entirely alone despite knowing that the physical was illusion. “I might be able to manage it if we had

your data pad on hand. Your mind is remarkable, but I'm afraid it has its limits when it comes to external networking capability. I had an amplifier installed at the Ranch some time ago."

"If only you'd had it installed in *me*," Will said wryly.

"I considered it," Hannibal replied with a small smile. "I admit that I am now regretting not to have done so."

"How unfortunate that you have some semblance of personal autonomy," he told the ANA in a dry tone.

Sparing Will a brief, amused glance in the dim light of the transport, he gestured toward his bonds. "I managed to produce some leverage this time when they bound you. When the opportunity arises, I will dislocate your thumb to free your right hand."

"Won't that be fun," he muttered softly. "How bad are my injuries?" Here Hannibal hesitated to answer him and Will frowned. "What is it?"

"They have been…very careful with you, Will. As it stands, your only present ailments would be the lingering muscle fatigue from your heat and the superficial wound at your temple from the removal of the LED."

Brow furrowed slightly, Will studied Hannibal for a moment and found himself wishing that he could still feel him as he had during the three days the ANA had piloted the android. "You're suggesting they're trying to…preserve me for what's coming." Hannibal inclined his head in agreement and Will huffed out a soft breath. "Well…that's certainly reassuring," he said sarcastically.

"We're slowing down," Hannibal warned him, but Will could already feel the shift in the transport around him.

The dim light cast by the idle MDs grew brighter as they roused from whatever standby mode had been engaged, standing as one when the transport came to a complete stop. Those closest to Will took hold of his dolly and disengaged the locks that had secured it during the drive while the others filed out obediently. Rolling him forward, the MDs lifted him out into what looked like the loading bay of what looked to be a lab or medical facility, over bright and sterile.

"Agent Graham," Chilton cooed, coming around from the front of the transport. "Welcome to Muskrat Pharm. If you would be so kind as to follow me." Painted lips curved in a smile that suggested she thought herself very clever and Will could hardly contain his disgust.

Hannibal, of course, didn't bother to try. "Were she able, Bedelia would likely cut out her own tongue than continue to disgrace it with such a pitiable caricature of villainy," he commented with mild revulsion and Will's lips twitched upward in morbid amusement.

Chilton's smile fell away, her expression becoming tight with old insecurities. "What is it? Is he- what is he saying about me?" she demanded, which only served to further widen Will's smirk. Her eyes blazed briefly, but she forcibly calmed herself a moment later, smoothing

back her hair. “Enjoy it while you can, Agent Graham.” Turning on her heel, Chilton led them away and further into the building, the MDs trailing after to roll Will between them.

“That probably was ill advised of me,” Hannibal admitted softly and Will scoffed at him in return, sparing him a look as he murmured back.

“What, because now he’ll kill me *twice?*”

Tilting his head, Hannibal gestured at the illusion of his body. “It isn’t outside the realm of possibility, Will.”

Subdued, Will’s brow furrowed and he stared darkly after the retreating figure, a sick coil of anxiety curling in his belly at the thought. There wasn’t time available for him to lose his focus here in the lion’s den, and so Will forcibly put that fear aside. Chilton led them into a proper laboratory filled with equipment wholly unfamiliar to him and set behind a heavy quarantine door. Since Hannibal’s input was now based solely on his own senses, Will carefully scanned the room as his dolly was pushed inside and secured to the floor once more.

“Most of this equipment is used in the creation of ANAs,” Hannibal explained for his benefit, pointing out various items. “Brain scanner, map generator… What they’ve put you beneath is used to apply maps onto existing hardware, but it can also be used to...erase an existing map. A reformatting procedure, if you will.” Though Will stiffened at the revelation, Hannibal continued to examine the room, calm and implacable as he stopped beside a long, oblong container. “This is…”

“Ah-ah, Agent Graham,” Chilton chided from where she’d been watching Will with a self-satisfied expression, her arms folded across her chest. “It’s rude to go guessing at the entertainment before your host has even arrived.”

“Not to worry, Doctor Chilton, I’m here now,” a voice called from the doorway, oddly impeded. At a glance, Will could immediately see why, for the thing that came through the door was so far removed from a man that it was hard to believe he’d ever been classified such.

Mason Verger was an extreme cybernetic, composed more of metal and silicone than flesh and bone that was visible beneath the long, velvet jacket he wore as the only concession to traditional clothing. In the wake of his paralysis, he’d clearly elected for mass amputation of his useless, atrophied limbs rather than wait for technology to advance to the point of rewiring his central nervous system. Instead of disguising the prosthetic nature of his body, the inner workings had been left completely exposed, flaunted rather than hidden beneath a layer of false skin. Many of his organs looked to have been replaced as well, likely due to the added strain of supporting so much hardware in an aging, damaged body. For whatever reason, the man had left the ruin of his face unaltered, the skin grafts from Margot’s mutilation tight around his skull and dull with age. His eyes were the only truly human thing about him, electric blue and set behind delicate gold frames, lit from within by a roiling, intelligent madness.

Anticipation. Recompense. Need.

“So…” he drawled slowly as he stepped into the room, footsteps heavy against the floor. “This is the infamous Will Graham I’ve been hearing so much about.” An android shadowed Verger as he approached to take in Will more closely, one of the trademarked Verger Butcher models. Will could feel at a glance that the android was an Artifice. “Not bad…not bad at all. You’ve outdone yourself this time, Doctor Chilton. Perhaps I’m not as upset as I expected to be that you so badly mishandled the girl.”

From across the room, Will could see Chilton’s expression freeze as she paled considerably, swallowing around a throat gone suddenly dry. “I know that this isn’t what you planned for, Mason,” Chilton started in a placating tone. “But as I explained on our call earlier, Agent Graham will prove to be a far more satisfying choice than Miss Hobbs.”

“Bait,” Will said softly in realization, sharing a brief look with Hannibal before he looked back toward the cybernetic. “I was a lure for Abigail…you wanted me to draw them out.”

Verger clucked his tongue against his teeth lightly, his eyes focusing intently upon Will. “Oh well done, Agent Graham… Yes, I’ve spent *years* hunting the Hobbs girl…she was to be my prize trophy. The well-earned conclusion to a long game that was, unfortunately, squandered by less capable hunters.” At this, Chilton tightened her hands into fists, but said nothing. “You see, I’ve grown tired of this old song and dance…there’s only so many ways to skin a cannibal.”

“This is a cryo-pod, Will,” Hannibal broke in softly, drawing his attention back to the white, oblong container.

“What’s in the box, Mason?” Will asked the twisted thing before him, keeping his face impassive as he felt the sickening pop of his thumb dislocating, the pain dulled by Hannibal’s intervention.

The terrible whorls of scar tissue that made up his face twisted in some semblance of mirth, but Will could feel the malicious glee flowing freely from him; a dark, triumphant humor. “I think you mean to say ‘who’.”

Though the suspicion had been blooming in his mind, it still hit him like a physical blow. “Hannibal…” he breathed out.

“Such a quick boy you are. I like that.” Stepping over to the cryo-pod, Verger leaned against it with casual disrespect, knocking on the lid. “It’s cost me nearly as much to keep our mutual friend alive as it is myself! Though I must admit, he’s in much better condition, the scoundrel.” His metal fingers tapped out a rhythm on the casing and he gave Will another of his grotesque smiles. “Not for long, though…soon I’ll be the belle of the ball in my new person suit.”

A sort of sick numbness washed over Will and settled into his belly as a pool of dread, his eyes flicking toward Du Maurier’s hijacked form. Wafting satisfaction at the attention, Chilton’s mouth curved in a sharp, ruthless smile. “Don’t worry, Agent Graham…I’m sure it’s quite painless.”

“Keep them talking, Will. I need more time,” Hannibal said from his side.

“You’ve kept him in stasis all this time so that you can what? Make him a prisoner in his own head like you did with Bedelia?” Will asked and was glad the LED was no longer there to betray the inner turmoil of his mind, allowing him some illusion of calm.

“Not at all,” Verger corrected, drawing Will’s attention back to him. “Though I do appreciate your way of thinking, Agent Graham. But killing Hannibal with my own hands, relatively speaking, has always been the final play.”

The horror of it punched into Will suddenly and his vision wavered slightly. “Me. You’re going to kill him through me,” he said numbly, the thought of Mason Verger wearing his skin needling uncomfortably at his mind. “But…*why?* Why should it even matter if it’s me?” Even as the question left him, Will could feel the inaccuracy of it. “No…you wanted Abigail. It was meant to be her.”

“There have been more than a dozen hosts since we began this,” Chilton explained, gesturing toward him expansively. “Time after time, regardless of gender or designation, we watched the same sordid tale unfold. Hannibal is installed, Hannibal gains control, Hannibal kills and feeds his victims, always organics, to his hosts. At times the hosts have been active participants, others were completely unaware. When I was sure my former colleague thought himself to be winning, I would collect and deliver.” Here she nodded toward Verger. “In all the years of the hunt, there had never been any serious deviation until sweet, manipulative Abigail…and then there was you.”

“Do you know why it is that he only ever kills organics?” Verger asked morbidly and Will looked toward Hannibal, unsurprised to see an expression of mild curiosity there.

There were any number of reasons that Will could have guessed in this, all of them ringing a certain amount of truth. The need for power, to prove superiority while trapped within a fallible human prison. A chastisement toward those who thought themselves above the improvements devised by clever minds such as the man he’d been. Justice for crimes or slights that were found to be just repugnant enough not to allow the possibility of further breeding into the existing population. But of all possible truths, Will thought that the most correct was the simplest of them.

“Because cybernetic implants ruin the flavor of the meat,” he said irreverently and saw Hannibal smile.

Cocking his head in careful consideration, Verger nodded slowly. “Maybe you always were the better choice, after all. I had so looked forward to playing the role of the wounded dove, preying on what little familial love our dear Doctor Lecter has hiding within him, but I have to admit…I’m excited by this new development you’ve provided me, Agent Graham. In twenty-odd years, Hannibal has certainly never purchased one of his omega hosts an Artificial Alpha, much less given one his *teeth*,” Verger pointed out emphatically, gesturing toward the mark on Will’s throat.

“He won’t know me,” Will whispered. “You won’t be able to fool him so easily.”

“I would know you in an instant,” Hannibal corrected him softly and Will gave him an almost betrayed look for it, heedless of the others. There was an almost grudging admiration in his

expression, a small concession to the intended cruelty of Mason's machinations, but he set that aside to cup Will's neck, granting him the illusion of his touch. "Your scent, your touch, the shadows of your mind. All of it a siren's song I would fall into again and again."

"Don't-" Will's pained denial was cut short by the sharp pulse of an alarm, bathing them all in flashes of warning yellow.

"Unauthorized entry through the East Bay doors," Verger's Artifice stated calmly, eyes flickering as they processed the data.

From off in the distance came a clamor of chirps and whistles and sirens so achingly familiar that Will's heart was helpless but to race in response to the sudden surge of *hope*. His dogs had arrived.

"*Go!*" Chilton snapped at her MDs, jabbing a finger toward the door as the androids quickly filed out toward the sound.

"Cordell," Verger commanded shortly, all trace of his earlier humor now faded. The Artifice obediently followed after the MDs, a far more imposing figure than the slight, featureless droids. "Get on with it, Chilton. No time for revelries, it would seem."

The blast of a T800 hand cannon sounded and Chilton's eyes widened as she hurried forward, quickly keying up the sequencing on the machine above Will. "You think it makes any difference?" she hissed spitefully. "Why can't you just die like all the others?"

A glow started above Will's head as the machine warmed up, but he found that he had no control over his body now. Hannibal had taken hold. With startling speed, his arms, freed from their restraints, shot out to catch hold of Chilton in one hand and the reimaging device above them in the other. With a tug, Hannibal brought it down to rest solely over the soft, stolen waves of blonde hair and afforded his former colleague a small, satisfied smile.

"Because you aren't good enough, Frederick. You never were," Hannibal said calmly and Will relished in the frantic pulse of fear that washed through his mind before a bright flash blinded them. When it cleared, Du Maurier's face was slack and shocked, a fine tremble going through her as she sank out of Hannibal's grip to the floor.

"No!" Verger cried in dismayed anger, flinching back a step in surprise.

The split second of cowardice was enough for Hannibal to undo the restraint on Will's chest and thighs even as something flew across the floor in a whir of motors. With a small screech of wheels breaking on tile, Buster partially collided with Will's dolly and jabbed at the release to his ankle restraints, freeing him fully. Together, Will and Hannibal stepped forward, carefully avoiding Du Maurier's limp, quivering form.

"Well, Mason?" Hannibal asked, straightening. "Shall we finish this?"

"I've killed you any number of times already, Hannibal!" the cybernetic declared with false bravado, but Will could feel the truth of his mind. "You really think you stand a chance now?"

Fear. Doubt. Rage.

“Actually, we do,” Will spoke up, his lips pulling back in a feral grin. “And so do you.”

An MD slammed into the wall of the corridor outside and was almost immediately set upon by Winston, who released a terrifying robotic snarl as he bit into its torso to take hold of the power core, ripping it free with a powerful surge of his jaw. He leapt away a moment later as Cordell grabbed for him, thick silicone flesh torn over the metal frame beneath. Harley surged forward to seize one of the Artifice’s arms in her clamps, yanking him back away from Winston with a surge of hydraulics. The Artifice rounded on her angrily, but then froze when he saw something further down the corridor and threw his massive frame sharply to the side as a blast of electroshock went off over his head.

“Fucking *hold still* and let me *shoot you!*” Beverly yelled from down the corridor, but Will briefly thought that it was one of the most beautiful sounds he’d ever heard. Then he didn’t have time to process much of anything, because Verger had taken up a scalpel from a nearby tray and lunged for him.

Twenty years of upgrades had made Verger terrifyingly fast, very nearly rivaling that of an Artifice. But his mind was still his own, aged and human where Will had Hannibal’s circuitry, his processing speed and killer’s instincts alongside his own empathy. Together, they were deadly…but not infallible.

Fire bloomed in Will’s face for the briefest instant before Hannibal squelched it, the scalpel having cut through his cheek, missing muscle and bone to pass harmlessly in the space between his teeth. Closing his jaw tightly around the blade, they jabbed at the exposed hydraulic line of Verger’s arm and shifted away from him. As though he’d been called, Winston darted into the room and leapt onto Verger’s back while Hannibal carefully removed the knife from Will’s face, but a metal hand got between the robotic canine’s jaw and the cybernetic’s ruined human features.

“*Cordell!*” Verger roared and the Artifice managed to tear himself free of Harley, disconnecting his arm at the socket to do so.

Charging into the room, Cordell kept Max from following with a savage kick that sent the robot tumbling into one of the remaining MDs, then slammed the quarantine door shut and engaged the lock. With another blast of her hand cannon, Beverly came sliding into view, sparing a moment to ensure the dogs had a handle on the MDs before she yanked on the door. It held fast and she cursed, slamming her robotic hand against the thick glass. Will could see her mouth form his name in a panic on the other side, but the closure of the heavy door had censured much of the sound from the hallway. He let out a cry of warning when Cordell made for Winston, but it wasn’t quick enough to stop the Artifice grabbing hold of the canine droid, ripping him off of Verger and hurling him at Will.

Though Will’s every instinct was to catch his dog, Hannibal wisely rolled them out of the way, allowing Winston’s heavy metal frame to hit the far wall with a grinding crunch that surely would have crushed them. The artificial dog lay still where it had fallen, but Will couldn’t spare him more than a passing moment’s thought because now they were outnumbered. And from the malicious satisfaction and relief flaring off of Verger, he knew it.

Buster bumped against Will's hand where he crouched on the ground and he tensed slightly as the small cleaning droid dropped something cylindrical onto his fingers. Hannibal kept their gaze on Verger and Cordell as he palmed the device and Will realized suddenly what it was.

"No!" he gasped out before Hannibal could stop him, because Will recognized all of his equipment by feel…which very much included the emergency EMP that was now in his grasp. The same EMP he had nearly used to kill Hannibal just hours before. Though Will fought for control of his body as his fingers blindly sought the activation switch, it was too late. Hannibal had full authorization.

The river swirled around his thighs, steady and clear and shockingly cold as it flowed ever away from Will where he stood in it. His refuge, Hannibal's gift to him, was just as achingly beautiful as every time before, though it brought him little peace now. It was the last time he would ever see this place, he knew, but Will hardly spared a thought for it now as he turned, searching until he found Hannibal at his side.

"Don't do this," he pleaded softly, feeling as though his words were already lost to the river about him.

Lifting a hand, Hannibal gently brushed Will's dark curls back over an ear, looking as regretful as he did set in his path. "It's already done. We have twenty seconds."

"*Why?*" Will gasped out in pain, feeling the pending loss twist painfully like a knife in his belly. "Why would you do this?"

"You said it yourself, dear Will," Hannibal told him gently. "This isn't real."

"I *lied*," he lamented, tears swelling in his eyes as emotion threatened to choke him.

"I know," Hannibal whispered softly and drew him in, allowing their heads to rest together. "Will, I lo-"

The EMP gave off a burst of too-bright light that consumed his vision, blinding Will as he stumbled backwards, fully in control of his body once more. Solely in control.

Pain crested over his body like a wave, bringing with it all the hurts Hannibal had hidden from him; the dull throb of his brow, the burning slice to his face, the tear and ache of muscle from his desperate fight. In the wake of the open wound of his heart, it was meaningless and small, barely recognizable as physical discomfort at all. As his vision cleared, Will found Cordell and Verger frozen in place from where their systems had failed in the EMP blast, but though the Artifice was dead, Verger remained very much alive.

A thump drew Will's attention back toward the quarantine door and he stared numbly at Beverly, who mimed frantically at the locking mechanism. Given the localized quality of the emergency EMP, only the area immediately surrounding where Hannibal had gotten in close to Verger and Cordell had been hit, leaving the majority of the equipment, including the cryo-

pod and the quarantine door, unaffected. For a brief moment, Will made as though to go to his partner, then realized Verger's mechanical accoutrements were coming back online. Apparently the obscene amount of credits he'd shelled out in keeping his broken body alive had included a back-up system in case of EMP blasts.

"Alright, Agent Graham," the cybernetic wheezed with effort. "We'll call this one a draw. I'm ready to surrender into your custody."

Will stared at him incredulously, bruised and bleeding in ways unseen and realized suddenly that Verger still intended to walk away from this. Still believed that he was simply dealing with an agent of the ABAU. With laws and regulations. Beverly's pounding increased on the glass at whatever she saw in his face, but Will was already moving toward Verger.

"You wanted to get inside my head, Mason," Will said in a calm, even tone. "You thought Hannibal Lecter was the darkest thing in there." Verger's eyes widened with sudden trepidation as Will reached out and cupped either side of his face with a gentle tenderness, as though he were a lover. "Let me show you what's inside."

Reaching into the darkness within, Will unleashed it all upon the twisted ruin of flesh between his palms, opening the floodgates on his gift. Every horror, every terrible, twisted thing that he'd ever absorbed in through the curse of his empathy lay there in wait, soaking in to the recesses of his mind. Thirty-three years of emotional resonance emptied from his mind into Mason Verger's with such force that Will barely even noticed when the man broke under the onslaught.

Time became meaningless as Will stood in the cresting wave of his inner demons, the beauty and ugliness of sentient emotions absorbed over the course of his life, weaponized as he'd never allowed himself before. It felt *good*. However long he reveled in the tumultuous furor of his dark gift, it was enough time for Bedelia Du Maurier to brush aside shock and trauma in the interest of self-preservation. On unsteady legs, she divested herself of her heels and got to the quarantine door, opening it as much to free herself as to let Beverly in.

He didn't process the sound of his partner's voice until she forced herself into his field of view, her expression grim and her service pistol raised. "Graham," she said calmly, but her mouth was twisted down with the very real fear that she would have to shoot him. "I need you to back down."

Slowly, his eyes slid away from Mason Verger's wide, empty stare and Beverly flinched back as she was dealt a glancing blow of the chaos of his gaze. "Will, *please!*" she begged even as she tightened her grip on her weapon, no hesitation in her aim.

For a moment, he welcomed the death she unwillingly offered him, a final escape from the dark truths of his mind that he'd so long avoided. Then light caught off the cryo-pod just behind his partner and his heart lurched. Closing his eyes with effort, he relaxed his hands, letting them fall to his sides as he reigned in the empathic tempest he had unleashed. It was over.

“So I’m sitting at home, minding my own fucking business and wondering why it is my partner of six years has suddenly, *inexplicably* taken leave without so much as a ‘by the way’, when a message pops up on my data pad out of nowhere,” Beverly explained as she checked over the fallen, mangled remnants of the MDs to ensure none of them were going to spring back into action and attack. “All it says is ‘Will needs you’ with a GPS pin tied to the Ranch. So I drive my happy ass out to the edge of No Man’s Land with no idea of what to expect, only to have your dogs- sorry, your pack of scary *murder bots*- rush my car like I’m transporting a bomb.”

Nodding a little, Will watched her move through the wreckage with no small amount of disassociation, feeling utterly drained after expending his gift as he had. “Han- Doctor Lecter must have had enough clearance to send you a message as my emergency contact when I was taken the first time.”

“I’m your emergency contact?” she asked in some surprise, then paused and frowned. “Wait, the *first* time?”

“It’s been a long day,” Will told her with a wry, tired smile. “Did they total your car?”

“What? Oh, right, the dogs. No, I thought they had finally gone mad and killed you, so I jumped out and started yelling at them. Honestly, I don’t even remember what I said, but it was enough that they backed down and let me come inside to search the Ranch for you.” Satisfied that the area was secure, she holstered her weapon and turned back toward him. “I was just about to give it up and call in a coast-wide manhunt for you when the dogs suddenly perked up and took off. Led me right here to you. You look like shit, by the way.”

“Thanks, Katz,” he intoned dryly, but meant it honestly.

“Don’t thank me yet, because I have, quite literally, one *million* questions right now.”

“I’m sure you do. Just…give me a moment.” Pushing unsteadily to his feet, Will made his way to the door and looked down the corridor, unsurprised to see that Bedelia hadn’t gotten far. Walking over to the shell-shocked woman, he crouched beside her, looking at her steadily as he offered his hand. “I need you to help me wake him up.”

Bedelia stared back at him blankly, her mind in turmoil as it wavered wildly between shock, rage, fear and an overwhelming amount of *relief.* Slowly, as though unsure of her own body, she fit her hand into his with a short nod of acceptance and allowed Will to pull her to her feet. Escorting her back into the room, he left her to her work and turned back toward his partner, who had been watching him with a small, uneasy frown.

“Let me start at the beginning.”

Will explained it all to Beverly as best he could while Bedelia worked at the consoles connected to the cryo-pod. The true identity of Hannibal Lecter, the truth of the ANA Project, the origin of Mason Verger’s vendetta, the game he and Frederick Chilton had played for over two decades, the murders, the Ripper, Abigail and the fate they had planned for her. The fate Will had instead only narrowly avoided. Taking it all in, Beverly’s expression went from bemused confusion to grim opposition, taking in the occupants of the room, dead and alive,

in a new light. Neither one of them said anything for a long time once he was finished, their shocked silence broken only when Bedelia's soft, even voice spoke up.

"It's done. The final sequencing is underway," she said and brought up the display monitor before stepping back.

For a moment, Will didn't fully recognize the lax figure pictured in it and felt a brief moment of panic before he remembered the first time Hannibal had asked to look at him. Had asked to see Will through his own eyes. The reflection, the remembered self of Hannibal's brain map had been all he'd ever known. A look through Hannibal's eyes. The prone figure displayed before him now was the reality, no less striking, but startlingly, inescapably *real*.

"Will, wait," Beverly forestalled him, moving between Will and the cryo-pod as he instinctively gravitated toward it. "Are you sure we should even wake this guy up?"

Looking at her directly, Will was unfazed by the pulse of fear and doubt even as she flinched reflexively. "Beverly," he began, but she held up a hand.

"No, listen to me. He *changed* you, Will. You're not who you were a year ago. Please don't make me come up with some kind of Pandora's Box metaphor here," she joked, but her eyes were pleading. "What you've become…it scares me."

Stepping forward, Will reached out and pulled Beverly into an embrace, offering his affection for the first time in their years together. Likely she would have been less shocked had he attacked her instead. "It should," Will told her quietly and heard Beverly catch her breath. "It scares me, too…but I've never felt more myself. Before Hannibal, I wasn't living, I was… *surviving*. Existing in my reality without expectation or inspiration to thrive in it." He sighed and tightened his hold slightly, seeking his own comfort a moment. "Maybe this is a fool's errand. Maybe the person in that pod is far removed from the one I knew and…and loved." Drawing back, he gripped her shoulders lightly, giving his partner an earnest look. "But I have to *try*."

Reaching for her with his gift, Will pushed out his emotions to her in a gentle flow, a far cry from the lethal blow he'd so recently dealt Mason Verger. In their years together, Will had always known Beverly on a deeper level than she him by virtue of his gift and he worked now to shift a little of that back to her. Her eyes brightened with unshed tears to feel his regard for her, the warm thread of care and friendship with which he regarded their partnership. Though Beverly had always considered herself a hard woman, the tears slipped free of her when Will then let her feel the raw, broken place where Hannibal had been ripped from him.

"Dammit, Graham," she sniffed and wiped at her eyes roughly. "You're not supposed to fall in love with the monsters in your head."

Releasing her, Will gave his partner a steady look that had Beverly averting *her* gaze for once. "*Folie à deux*... He wasn't the only one in there."

Grimacing at that particular sentiment, her eyes slid briefly toward the twisted remains of Mason Verger before she sighed and turned toward the cryo-pod. "They won't just let you

wake him up and live happily ever after, you know."

Chuckling at the thought, Will moved beside her and looked at Hannibal's slack, *genuine* face on the display monitor. "That's not really how I picture this going anyway. We may just end up killing one another." He said it with a casual honesty that had Beverly glaring at him. "At least this time, I have the advantage."

"What I *meant* is that they'll want to hold him accountable once the truth about Lecter Ltd and the ANA Project comes to light," she pointed out sourly, folding her arms in clear disapproval. "They might even try to charge him for the crimes committed by his hosts." From her tone, it was obvious that she felt that they *should*.

Nodding in acknowledgement of her veracity, Will gave his partner a wry smirk, made all the gorier by the wound Verger had scored on him. "Then give me a head start."

Light filtered into the cryo-pod in a slow, steady wave, growing ever brighter until its occupant finally became aware of it, his body jerking as it took a sudden, gasping breath. Disoriented, he was uncertain whether or not he'd been blinded, faced as he was by a featureless field of white, and he shuddered as his body continued to gasp harshly for air. With a soft hiss, the seals on his pod released and the blank field above him slid away in a cloud of chilled air.

Slowly, his mind started to piece together back where it had last left off in brief flashes of memory like photographs. Verger. The Asylum. Chilton. The brain mapping. The experiments. The cryo-pod. *This* cryo-pod. The lab beyond the housing looked alien to him, but Dr. Hannibal Lecter was certain that this was the very same cryo-pod that he last remembered being placed in.

Some part of his mind already began working through the symptoms of waking from cryosleep, letting the science behind the cryonics keep his hindbrain from going into shock. The cryoprotectant in his body that had kept ice crystals from forming and prevented his cells from degenerating needed to be expelled and replaced with water. He would need an excessive amount of carbohydrates to help stabilize his temperature and ensure his metabolism restarted properly. That he was thinking clearly and growing more cognizant by the second was a good sign that he'd been thawed out correctly, but the same paralyzing agent that had been placed in his system before they'd put him under kept him from moving overtly.

Tracking movement in his vision, Hannibal managed to bring his eyes in focus on a man leaning over his pod and his breath faltered in his lungs as he did. The man was terrible and lovely; his dark curls wet against his scalp and his face bruised and broken in places, blood weeping sluggishly from a deep cut at his cheek, but dried and tacky at his brow. But his eyes…his eyes were *truly* arresting. Death lay in wait there, a heady promise of dark desire, of *hunger* and *purpose.* And though he was a stranger, he looked at Hannibal now as though *he* were part of that design.

"Hello, Doctor Lecter," the man greeted him softly, the words slurred slightly from his injury.

“W…who…” Hannibal managed to force out past numb lips.

A hand cupped his cheek and the sensation of physical touch was almost too much to process, overwhelming his newly wakened senses. The strong scent of blood washed over him and Hannibal realized the man’s hand was wet with it, smearing the slickness onto his skin as though in gruesome claim. Beneath the sweet, metallic tang of blood was something else, a scent that called to Hannibal in a way that was unfamiliar to him. A scent that held a whispered suggestion of…home.

“My name is Will Graham,” the man told Hannibal and slid a bloody thumb across his lips. “You don’t have to be afraid.” Leaning in, Will gave him a wide, red-tinged smile and Hannibal’s heart skipped a beat for the dark loveliness of it. “I’m going to take *excellent* care of you.”

End Notes

Additional warnings: Graphic depictions of canon-typical murder scenes, gas lighting, major character death (Hannibal AI), minor character death (Ripper AI, Abigail Hobbs, Gavin Reed, others), very slightly implied Connor/Gavin, attempted non-consensual cannibalism, implied non-consensual cannibalism, consensual and non-consensual loss of autonomy, forced heat, dubious consent to heat sex, lots of attempted or successful murder, enslavement of sentient minds, implied animal cruelty, murder games and mind control.

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Don't forget to give lasicaaa ALL the love for the art here!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!